

Making Inclusion Happen Podcast – Episode 3: Supporting students on the autism spectrum

With Dr Sofia Mavropoulou and A/Prof Beth Siggers

Haley: Welcome to Making Inclusion Happen – a podcast that opens up conversations about what genuine inclusive education is and is not, and what we can do to make inclusive education a reality. This week, I'm speaking with C4IE Centre members, Associate Professor Beth Siggers and Dr. Sophia Mavropoulou, about supporting students on the autism spectrum in inclusive classrooms. Beth and Sophia have both worked as teachers and with teachers, Beth in Australia, and Sofia in Greece. And both have particular expertise in supporting students on the autism spectrum. Welcome, Beth and Sophia. It's great to have you both with us.

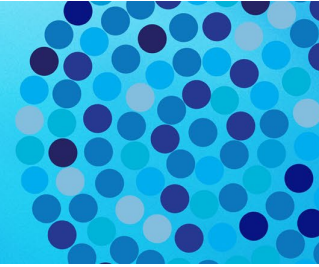
Sofia: Thank you. Hayley for the invite.

Beth: Thanks, Hayley.

Haley: This podcast is a place where we think and talk about what we need to do to make inclusion happen. Thinking back to a comment made by Pauline Hanson some years ago, that got a lot of traction at the time, I'd like us to trouble the notion that students on the autism spectrum are somehow unable to be included. That they somehow represent a bridge too far. Where do you think this view comes from? And do you think it's correct?

Sofia: I think that this view comes from anecdotal evidence. It comes from informal conversations with teachers that are really struggling to support students that are on the spectrum, and they are in regular schools. And because they are facing so many difficulties, they prefer not to have them in class. But it's not so much what the statement is about. It's also, who is the person who expresses that public view and what influence they can have on other people's minds. And that is very worrying for me. So, when that statement was in the news, I was surprised. It was when I had, a few years after I had been in Australia. And that was in a way, a disillusion for me because I felt that, well, does this mean when it comes from a person that has so much influence in the community and so much political power and has been elected, does this mean that the future for students on the spectrum is not in the regular schools? And how we can actually use that as an opportunity to take part in that debate and express different views and give all the evidence that says that students with autism can be in the regular school, but they need support. They need support that has to be tiered support. So, when teachers have the training and the support in class, they can do a lot, these students, and other students can benefit from having students on the spectrum in the same class.

Beth: So, for me, it's not so much about being a bridge too far, but the fact that with inclusion we're not quite there yet. In some ways we are, but for some students on the spectrum, for example with very complex learning profiles, that's where we're not there yet. And we need additional support in schools for teachers and the students to ensure that those more complex learning profiles are adequately and



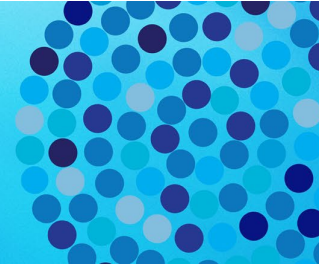
effectively supported within mainstream settings. And that includes, particularly, elements of well-being. And I think one advantage of COVID is it has really put back the spotlight on mental health and some of the sort of hidden complexities of the learning profiles learners on the spectrum can experience within mainstream settings. And the importance not only of supporting their well-being, but teacher well-being. Because teacher well-being is very important in effectively including all students as well. So, it's about some of those more complex learning profiles and making sure that schools have the capacity and are provided with the support required to be able to address that and have access to external agencies and support as well.

Haley: I'm going to pick up on something you said there, Beth, around the idea of mainstream schools and whether or not they are fully including all students. And Linda Graham spoke about that in one of her recent podcasts which is soon-to-be released, will be released ahead of this episode in fact. But the idea that if schools are for a mainstream population, then they won't be inclusive for all students because a mainstream school still kind of speaks to a periphery. And that means that we're not including everybody. So, yeah, that's a really important point you've made.

Sofia: And the other thing I wanted to bring into the discussion is that we're all accountable. When we hear these statements, we have to really think about our own responsibility as people who live in the same communities, these patterns that have these children and the teachers who are teaching these students. And from our own position and our own profession and our own life experience and the way that we engage with the community, we can take a role in this journey for including students with a disability, students on the spectrum. Because these are the students that have the highest numbers of exclusion, students that have mental health problems. And when I say accountability and responsibility, I'm just referring to a role as teachers teaching, pre-service teachers and students who are doing a postgraduate degree, and, um, they are learning how to support students with autism. So, we have responsibility in that as well.

Haley: No, I agree. I think, I feel it if somebody can be on the television and making statements to a broad audience that are anecdotal and not based on evidence, I agree that, I think we all, you know, anyone at any stage, if we know that that's incorrect, we need to call it out. A hundred percent. Okay. So, similar to the question that I asked, there seems to be a lot of initiatives that are for students on the autism spectrum. For example, both the LNP and Labor have committed to a National Autism strategy in this upcoming election. Why do you think that this group is singled out? And do you think that some of those initiatives could benefit all students with disability if implemented universally?

Sofia: I think that one of the reasons that it has been singled out is that for this group, there is evidence that has been collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. So twice, once in 2009 and then again in 2015, the Australian Bureau of Statistics was collecting data at a national scale for students with disability. And there was an extra body of evidence for students on the spectrum and people on the spectrum. So, there is evidence that tells us this number is increasing, that the barriers that



they're facing are still there. That the outcomes, the learning outcomes, post-school outcomes haven't been achieved yet. So that evidence requires action. So that could be one of the reasons that they have a sound basis for making a plan that will be a national plan to address the needs of this population that has been surveyed. It's the students, the teachers, and the parents that have taken part in the survey. And Beth, you have conducted the needs analysis and you have additional evidence to support that?

Beth: Yeah. I think the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as Sofia said, still identifies as a very high percentage of this group of learners who are experiencing barriers in their education. More recently, a research project that I was leading for the autism CRC as one phase in that project was actually looking at the fallout out of the inclusive school settings and how they were parents were having to make choices around alternate education.

Haley: Okay.

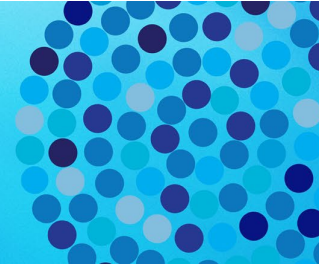
Beth: Not by choice, but it was a forced choice because of the failure of the school systems around some of those more complex needs. So, it is important to have a national strategy. I think the advantage of implementing some of these strategies in school systems is that it's going to have application and benefit for a lot of needs of a range of different students within that school system. So, there will be that application across whole student cohorts that can benefit from it as well.

Sofia: The other thing I wanted to add is that I would like to see in that National Autism strategy a much more explicit emphasis on the inclusion of students on the spectrum. Because we know that a large number of students with autism, they are in regular schools, but they are also in special schools. So, if this National Autism plan is going to really reinforce and enhance, you know, the resources in special schools, then I am very concerned. That is very concerning for me because then it will not really benefit all students with disability because we want to have more students in with the right supports in place.

Haley: Yes.

Sofia: So, if there is no clear direction and commitment as to how we can make inclusion work for students on the spectrum in regular schools within the national plan, then I don't know how progressive this plan is going to be and how successful is going to be.

Haley: Really important point. So, I was looking at the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education recently. Recommendation seven speaks to just what you've mentioned here, that there needs to be, so they recommended alignment between – they were talking specifically about the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and the Australian Standard for Principals and leaders – but you're right, if there's going to be a new strategy brought in, it needs to align with the disability standards for education. It also needs to align with general comment number four on the CRPD that Australia's ratified and signed the CRPD around inclusion. Um, and so if we're not upholding the values enshrined in those documents and we don't have that alignment, it's going to be really difficult for



people to implement those things, right?

Okay, so what would you identify as the greatest barrier facing students, school students on the autism spectrum? You've spoken a little bit to barriers already.

Beth: From my most recent research. If you are externalising the issues you're having, you are going to be more likely to be having some of your needs met. Not necessarily the ones that are behind the externalising – it's the internalising that is most problematic.

Haley: Could you give us some examples of that, Beth?

Beth: Very high levels of anxiety, which mean that you aren't coping within the school system, but you're not reflecting that anxiety through externalising behaviours such as aggression for example, you're internalising those.

Haley: So, students who maybe are passive or disengaged or they're fighting internal emotional turmoil that they're not expressing.

Beth: Yeah. And, I mean, linked with things like that is, for example, lack of attendance or spasmodic attendance. I'm doing some work with a lady in Canada at the moment where we're looking at the alignment between attendance policies and mental health and well-being policies across Ontario and Queensland. And while in the mental health strategies, for example, it talks about attendance as being an indicator. There's not that alignment between, well, what can you do to be better supporting students who might be experiencing some of these more internalising concerns?

Haley: Yes, and some of those strategies that we see, you know, attendance being rewarded, isn't going to work for these kids, is it?

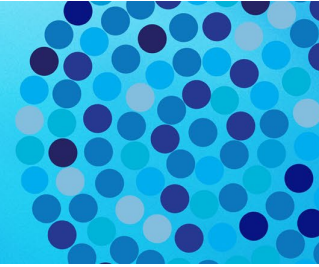
Beth: No, and in addition to that, whilst you might be getting additional support if you're externalising things, you might not be getting the appropriate support because the externalising behaviours aren't being interpreted or translated.

Haley: So it's kind of like, what's below the surface?

Beth: Yeah, it's the tip of the iceberg scenario. I mean, I talked to, did a presentation the other week around, yes, a lot of teachers are able to identify anxiety as a concern, but there's not the support for them to actually look at, well, what is feeding that anxiety? So they are looking at anxiety in a very superficial way rather than actually looking at some of the things that might be influencing or triggering that anxiety to the level that it's at.

Haley: Through the needs analysis that you conducted as part of the autism CRC; did you tap into some of what those underlying factors might be that contribute to externalising behaviours. Was that part of that needs analysis, or?

Beth: Definitely, all of the participants were strongly aligned in their view that it's the social emotional elements that are informing what's happening and is the biggest priority. It is things, for example, from the student perspective in the needs analysis. Navigating that social environment and schools are very social. They are not static. They're very fluid, socially dynamic environments. So you've got to be



very quick and responsive in the way you navigate that and that's challenging and anxiety inducing. The other thing was the sensory elements of the environment. Mainly managing the crowds and the noise, were two key things, navigating the executive function elements of an environment where too often you hear, "Oh, come on guys, you're in year five now, you should be able to organise yourself." Whereas these students who are adolescents were identifying that they still needed a lot of external support for the executive function elements of the environment. So, it's this perfect storm of things that comes across. And also, support for transitions. Early childhood teachers have amazing transitions. They just off the cuff can sing a song or do something that supports a transition for the students. But as kids get older, we assume they don't need that structure and transition support. This group of students identified that that's still important.

Haley: And when you speak to transitions, you're talking about moving between like parts of a lesson, that kind of thing?

Beth: Yes, so finishing one activity, moving to another. You know, moving from one lesson to another. Being able to stop something before you've fully completed it can be very anxiety inducing for some students. Moving from one year to the next, those major transitions as well. Even just moving into the day, moving out of the weekend into the school week, or any transition. And transitions make up 25 per cent of anybody's day. So, they are a significant part of anyone's day. And for any student, when you move into adolescence, socialising peaks; your demands on your executive function peaks at a time when your brain is going through a massive growth spurt and cannot necessarily cope with those executive function elements as well. And that's for any student.

Haley: Yes, I'm seeing it in my 12-year-old at the moment.

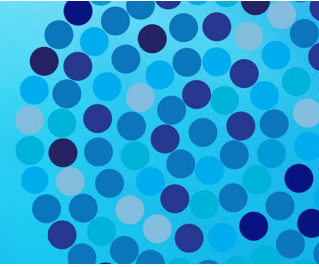
Beth: Yeah. The frontal lobe's not working quite as well at that point. So executive function demands are extremely high at that point.

Haley: Very interesting. Some of the work we've been doing at the moment, we're even seeing transition difficulties in students. And these students are not necessarily on the autism spectrum. Some might be, but with students with learning difficulties, that even when presented with some information and then followed with questions, unless there's a really clear transition that the information has finished, and now the questions start. The number of kids who were tripping on that little speed bump. Um, and so those signposts are so important to make sure that kid's attention is appropriately, directed, isn't it?

Beth: Yeah.

Haley: Yeah, Fascinating.

Sofia: I just wanted to add a few points here for this question. This is a very important question and it can trigger a lot of discussion. But I just need to highlight that we may provide a lot of support and we may have a lot of explicit teaching happening for the students on the spectrum, but it's a two-way process when you think of the barriers. So quite often the emphasis is, and most of the time you spend



on helping the students to learn how to navigate, helping the student to learn how to approach other students and make connections with them, have friendships with them, and so on. Having to learn all these skills to execute, complete the tasks. But we have to think about the way the tasks are presented. We have to think about the peers and how much they know about autism and how much they understand that that behaviour can change and what can cause that change. We need to understand how we need to work with peers so that they can do the work that we can do. So, when I think of barriers, I prefer to use this analogy that it's always two people on the bridge. It's not only one that has to pass the bridge, right? Someone is holding that bridge. And, um, this week in the in the unit that I teach in the Master of Ed, where the students are professional teachers, one of the students had a really big aha moment when we were discussing these universal strategies and said, we never thought that we could actually describe the barriers in the individualised education plan because we do have to write a list of universal strategies and adjustments. But when we profile the student, we give a lot of detail about what the student cannot do, and we don't actually write what the barriers are. Because when we have to think about universal strategies, we have to think about the tasks, about the physical environment, the sensory environment, group work and who is going to work, who is going to be the mentor or the buddy for that student. So, we think about the environment, we think about the attitudes, we think about the methods that we need to use, the appropriate methods, I mean, but we don't really outline these barriers very clearly in the individualised plan. And she said that she was going to discuss this with her head of inclusion in that school to see whether that could be something that could be added. Not really replace the learning profile because that's already there, they don't want to change it. So, the learning profile can have all these areas where the student is not really succeeding and they need support. But we also need to add that.

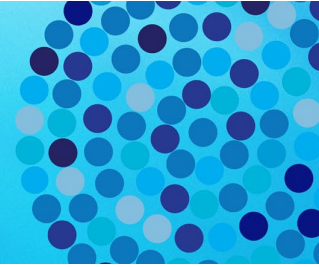
Haley: yes, the barriers being about interaction.

Sofia: Because that's what we, that's the starting point for all the universal strategies. And how are we going to remove the barriers if we don't identify them? And, you know, most of the time it's what other people do or don't do. For example, visual supports. Just give this brief example. So, students get the support from the teacher, but it doesn't happen consistently. So that can create a barrier. So just using strategies does not mean that the barriers are removed. Sometimes more barriers can be created. So, it's the use of the resource, it's the use of peers. It's the work that is being done systematically with the students that are around the student with autism. Because that's where the main area of need is. It's academic and social learning.

Haley: Yes, really important point.

Beth: Yes, and it goes beyond barriers to also identifying strengths. And also, it's not just about supporting students, it's supporting staff. It's not just about their professional learning, but it's also about helping them translate that professional learning into their practise.

Haley: Yes.



Beth: The number of times you hear it's important, collaborative partnerships are important. I mean, I've done a whole research project on collaborative partnerships and what they need to look like and how we can help teachers. But there's not enough support for translating this stuff into practise.

Haley: Yes.

Beth: And one of the key things, for example, with collaborative partnerships is giving people time for consultation where it's actually timetabled. And if you look at some of the, like a multi-tiered system, that requires a lot of consultation and collaboration between teams and families. So there needs to be more. It's not about just saying this is something teachers need to do. We need to look at, how do we actually support them to do it? And translate what is policy into practise. Because that's where there needs to be more traction and they can't do it on their own.

Haley: Yeah, really important point. So, Beth and Sofia, you collaborated to develop a graduate certificate and modules in inclusive strategies for students on the autism spectrum, which are available on the professional learning page of the C4IE website. So tell me, are the strategies in this course only useful for students on the autism spectrum, or are they helpful for a range of students?

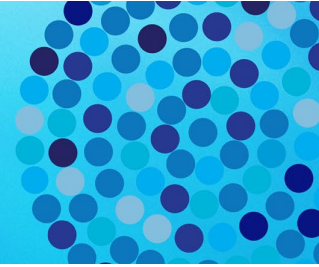
Beth: I certainly think some units in the graduate certificate talk uniquely about autism and some of the learning needs of that particular cohort. But in saying that, a lot of those learning needs can be reflected in the profiles of lots of different students. And that content knowledge is definitely going to help with a range of different learners. And then there are other units in that grad cert that would, the strategies definitely have application. And can, you know, we want to be able to put things into practice that are going to support not only that particular learning cohort, but also are easy to implement and address a wide range of needs within a school classroom context.

Sofia: So out of the five units in that grad cert, three of them are focused on strategies for teaching students on the spectrum, not on their characteristics or the theories that explain their behaviour. So, these three units that are focused on strategies are organised in tiers. So, we have one unit that is about context-wide strategies that can be useful for all. And then we have another two – we have another unit on targeted and intensive interventions and supports, and another unit on transitions and connections. Yes, connectedness within the classroom community and the school community and the community outside of the school.

Haley: I'll make some information about these offerings available in this show notes for our listeners.

Sofia: But also, this unit, I need to emphasise this because there are other grad certs, other courses that also have the same content, but the perspective that we have intentionally taken is different. And I just want to emphasise this because it just makes this certificate quite unique, I must say, in the way that we have conceptualised the barriers and how these strategies are presented as ways to remove the barriers. So, if you don't put that framing around the strategies, then it's very different because these strategies have the aim to remove the barriers for inclusion, right?

Haley: Yes.



Sofia: It's not for supporting students in other settings that are not inclusive. So, the emphasis is, how can you use these strategies effectively to include students on the spectrum? And that's why we have, you know, content about the social model of disability. And it is very hard for the students who have learned in one of these modules all the learning characteristics of students on the spectrum, to then think, well, I now know what can cause them anxiety and frustration and it's related with autism, so what can trigger that? So that's the new concept, a new concept that they have to learn and reflect on and then design a plan for support for these students. So that's very different from other courses from what we had seen. Because we did a search, a very careful search for other courses and what they teach and the perspective that they take. So, there's a lot of, first of all, it's in the title that it's inclusive strategies that is the focus of this course, but also, that is followed through the suite of units in that grad cert.

Beth: And the units that do look at characteristics, it's not about labelling a student. It's not about medical diagnosis, but it is about helping people to understand what might be some barriers in the environment and to identify those moving forward. It's linked to the professional standards on, know your students and how they learn. And that's what it's looking at.

Haley: Great. OK, so the Centre for Inclusive Education aims to produce high-quality impactful research on matters that affect students and school education, both in Australia but also around the world. And the aim is to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for all, especially those experiencing marginalisation. So basically, the plan is to change the world. How does your research and contribute to that important goal?

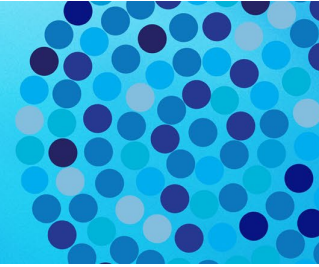
Beth: Well, certainly the recent research that we're still mining the data on, around those sort of complexities in learning profiles. Because as far as I'm concerned, that's the group that we're really not doing inclusion well for. And really unpacking – there is a huge fallout in school systems to more alternate sites and distance ed and home ed. Not because it's a preferred choice, but it's a forced choice. And students are being marginalised because of that. Families are being marginalised because of that. It has economic impact on families. It has well-being impact. It has connectedness impact as well. So that's sort of where my research, I want to head more and more into looking into that in more detail.

Haley: Are there, I mean, other than enrolment numbers, is there good data on numbers of students who are accessing education that's outside of the state or independent or Catholic sectors?

Beth: It's more around enrolment numbers. And also, it is pretty tricky. Like for example, there is sometimes a shift between home ed and distance ed, for example. I do know when I was setting up the research, the distance ed in Victoria contacted me because their numbers had tripled for this group in two years.

Haley: Wow, gosh, so during pandemic, post pandemic or even before the pandemic?

Beth: That's before.

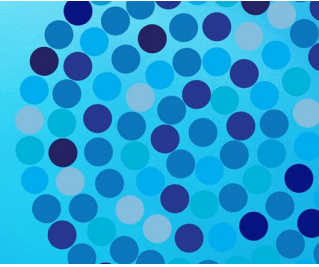


Haley: Yeah. Interesting. Okay. So, what about you, Sofia? I know that you are doing some really interesting and innovative research. How does that contribute to the goals at the centre?

Sofia: I wanted to talk about two projects. One is an ongoing project, and the other project has been completed. So just talk first about the project that has been completed. So that was work that we did in two schools with. Funding from the Autism CRC with Chris Chalmers, my colleague from STEL, from education, who is a robotics expert. And we were looking at how students can learn to take the perspective of someone else. And we were using a robot and also a story. And the teacher from the school, she was the learning support teacher, she worked with the group of five students. And we compared the learning in these two groups. So, one group had the story and the activities that went with it and the robot, and the other group didn't have the robot – only had the story and the story braid. The story braid is something tangible that students can hold in their hands and helps them. It has visual cues on the different parts of the story so that they can remember what comes at the beginning, what they need to say about this story character, how they felt, what they thought, what they did and why. So, what we found is that, was that a teacher who was using the story braid only without the robot was the one that had, where the students had most of the highest outcomes. They learned and they maintained these gains. So, it's interesting that schools don't have to invest...

Haley: The don't have to buy a robot!

Sofia: They don't have to buy the robot that costs about 20 thousand dollars, yeah! We did the research in two public schools and the teachers were very different. So, one had highly expertise in working with students with a disability and the other one was a digital technologies teacher. So, a digital technologies teacher that didn't have that in-depth expertise in the area of supporting students that are on the spectrum but was given the teaching plans in a very clear script. So, it was explicit instruction: tier two, a group of five students in class, working together for six sessions, and using the story braid. So that was a surprising finding. And we have taken video recordings of these sessions, so we are in the process of analysing this data and hopefully we will have some outputs in the coming months. We have submitted the report to the Autism CRC and also the teaching program that will become available quite soon. And the next project, which is the ongoing project, is another school-based project. So again, I'm working with teachers, so teachers are delivering the program; I have developed it. It's a program that taps into advanced social understanding. And it's, there are two areas in the curriculum in the personal and social capability. So, it's in the general capabilities in the literacy area, the personal and social capability area. So, teachers are using stories, they use ten stories. And these stories are about sarcasm, irony, deception, lying, misunderstanding, embarrassing phrases that we say, they are called "faux-pas" – we say sometimes phrases that are inappropriate without realising that the other person might feel awkward. So, these stories are brief, and teachers are using questions to check that students are understanding the content of the story. And then there are some conversation prompts that help the students think about the story characters, motivations, what they



were meaning, why they said that. They learn the vocabulary that goes with all these understandings of mental state. And then they have to write a paragraph about an incident that is very similar to the story characters' incident, what happened in the story. So, we are comparing the findings from three groups. So, one group are doing the reading, the stories, they have the discussion, the conversation with the teacher and the group, and the other, that is the intervention group. And then we have another group where they read the same stories, but they don't have any conversation, they just do a drawing activity straight after that. And then another group where they don't have any stories, they don't receive any of that, any of the two kinds of supports. And we are in the process of analysing the data from the three groups and trying to recruit another ten students on the spectrum to continue this project. Interestingly, the teachers that delivered – because they can use these teaching materials with other students – they have said that they can select the stories that they think help the students understand very clearly. These kind of, the ways that people use language and how they express their thoughts in ways that can be misinterpreted by students on the spectrum. So, they have to learn what these mean and why people use language in these particular ways.

Haley: Fascinating. Well, we look forward to reading more about that work as it becomes published. I will include some of your work in our show notes so people can come back and have a bit more of a read if they're interested in following up. I thank you both for your time. This has been a really interesting conversation.

Sofia: Thank you, Hayley.

Beth: Thank you.

Sofia: I enjoyed that too.