

## Inclusive Education

*Interview with Leanne Kitson*

**Inclusive education classrooms are becoming an essential part of learning for children with high support needs. But what is it really like for teachers in such a highly unpredictable environment?**

***'I think as teacher you always wanna do the best. You wanna go home every day knowing that you've done everything you can today to give them a good day. You certainly do go home sometimes and just think, could I have done more? Could I have done things differently? And then you have to stop and think, okay, we'll try again tomorrow.'***

### Introduction

**Jo:** Hi, I am Jo Chamberlain from *Messages of hope*, and today we are talking with Leanne who has worked with young people with disabilities for quite some time. So welcome, Leanne.

**Leanne:** Thank you.

**Jo:** Now I'd love to hear a little bit more about your experience working with children with special needs. Tell us about your journey through education and what you do now.

**Leanne:** So, I have been working with children, and young people with special needs for about 20 years. First in primary school and then over into a high school. Then it's moved into more of an advisory support role. So, supporting teachers and leaders and schools and sites and families with children with special needs, particularly, disabilities – intellectual disabilities, autism, those kinds of things. But I think all through my life, I've always been aware of, you know, people who might be on the edge, people who might be judged wrongly or not fitting in

**Jo:** Where did it all start?

**Leanne:** When we were living in WA at the time and I worked in a school and I was actually the kindy teacher there. And all was going along quite well until I got a little child, a little boy with autism. And at that time, I didn't know that much about autism at all, but I thought, that's okay, we can learn. Yeah, it was an interesting kind of time, and after a while, mum made the decision to move him and put him in another school. And that really got me thinking and it really stirred me up a bit, and I thought, 'well, hang on, we should be able to cater for everybody. What's going on here? What else can I learn to make things better?' And that started me really on that journey of catering for all students with needs, not just those who seem to do the right thing, be on task all the time and no problems with learning. So that was kind of where it started.

**Jo:** So, Leanne, tell me more about what inclusive education classrooms look like.

**Leanne:** They are aimed at the individual student, so they meet the needs of each child where they're at and take them from there to the next step, which that looks different for every child. And often the classes are smaller. You have less students in each classroom and they're purpose built. So, everything that you need is there, ready to go. Often the staff too have been there long term, and then you're with that child could be five, seven years, like their whole schooling. So, you really do get to know each other and it's really quite a beautiful family sort of atmosphere. And you do see children flourish in that environment, because they can feel safe and supported. Then they do start to flourish and step out. And especially in those teenage years, which we know are tricky anyway, but when you've got an intellectual disability where it's really hard to process what's going on, and understand what's happening around you, to be with your peers and feel safe and feel confident, ah what a difference that makes. So yeah, I've loved it. I've really enjoyed it.

**Jo:** That's a really good insight too with the teenage years because I guess for me, in my own situation with my daughter, that was really scary to think that she's out there with people who don't understand where she's at or don't understand her particular needs, and don't understand her safety levels.

**Leanne:** And I think that's a really good thing that schools can then offer because we can provide that in a safe way. So, it's all about those life skills and what they're gonna need post school. They're not with us forever. They're only here for a short time. Five years goes so quickly, or six now in high and then they're off. So, we can provide that safety for them and that supervision, that safe adult that can go with them to mainstream classes and go and try things and see things in a safe, supportive environment.

## **Challenges**

**Jo:** I can't imagine though, that it would always be a smooth run. Do you ever have those challenging times?

**Leanne:** I think as teacher you always wanna do the best. You wanna go home every day knowing that you've done everything you can today to give them a good day. I think it's tricky in special ed sometimes because you're just not sure if that was a good day because you haven't got that communication sometimes. And the learning can look different. You can sometimes go home and just think, 'oh, I don't know if anything much happened today. But I kept them safe. They were secure. They were nurtured, they were cared for, all of those things. That is okay. And we'll do it again tomorrow and the day after, and the day after.'

But yeah, you certainly do go home sometimes and just think, 'could I have done more? Could I have done things differently?' Like sometimes when the kids do react and there might be a meltdown, or there might be some reaction that I wasn't expecting and certainly didn't want, you know, and you think, 'What did I do wrong? How did I make that situation worse for that child?' So you certainly do

blame yourself. And then you have to stop and think, 'okay, we'll try again tomorrow,' and move on.

**Jo:** That's a real demonstration of a generous heart. A teacher who works in special needs, with special needs students certainly has a particular gift. Even just taking it on yourself, I mean, not all people can do that. So it does take a special kind of person to be in that environment.

I know for any teacher it is a challenging experience in a classroom because you've got multiple different needs in the classroom I can only imagine. Is it more intense in a special needs class?

**Leanne:** It certainly can be. And it's the unpredictability sometimes that makes it really challenging. Cos you can't always tell. And again, it comes back to that communication. You don't always know what's gone on for that child, even that morning, even a half an hour, even five minutes before. You're on guard the whole time. What *could* happen, what might happen.

**Jo:** But working with these young people and knowing a little bit more about their cues, you can at least pick that this person might need a bit more scaffolding, a little bit more structure to go, we know this is what's gonna happen next.

**Leanne:** And that's where a skilled teacher will know their students and be able to have things in place prior to. So, you're giving regular breaks and you're having time outside to have a swing and doing those things regularly. Because we don't want the child to be overstimulated and to go through those heightened states. It's not nice for them either. They don't wanna be there. So yeah, that is kind of our job: how can we ensure there's calm there, everyone's feeling supported and there's learning happening, whatever that can look like. And that can be very different. But sometimes things are outside of your control.

## **A Typical Day in a Special Needs Classroom**

**Jo:** So, the typical school day, how would that look?

**Leanne:** Yeah, so generally, children arrive and can come straight into their classroom. A lot of our children are actually transported in taxis, which is an incredible thing that our government does that. Their days are quite long as well. So, they're arriving in their classroom and usually straight into some sort of calming activity to help them feel regulated and safe. And then we might go through what's gonna happen today, what's the plan for today?

There's lots of visual supports around the classroom. Lots of guidance, lots of routine activities as well so that they know when they come to school, I do this, I do that, and then this happens and it's all very predictable and very calm and consistent for them.

**Jo:** So when you observe children in the classroom, how can you pick up whether they're coping or not?

**Leanne:** It does come down to really knowing your students, which is something we talk about all the time – knowing what is "normal" for them, what does calm look

like for them? And it will be different for different students. So, you really do need to know who they are and get to know them. Sometimes they're able to tell you, and so you really need to be listening for that. Sometimes they might not tell you in a pleasant, calm way. It might be in quite a loud, emotional way, but as we say too, all behaviour is communication. So, us as teachers, that's our job to work out what are they trying to communicate at this point in time.

**Jo:** That's quite a valid point to say 'all behaviour is communication.' I know, with my own daughter with special needs, she would often just stand there and smile at you and that was my cue to go 'this person's not understanding what you're saying.' Whereas in other teachers have actually said 'is she just naughty? Is she just laughing at me?' But to actually understand those particular cues, it's not the naughty child, it's the child that's not understanding or not being able to be aware of how they can respond.

**Leanne:** Because sometimes they're not verbal, they don't communicate verbally at all. So, you gotta work out other ways to find out what they know, what they're feeling, what they're experiencing, and all of that as well. So, lots of communicating with parents and caregivers, private providers and therapists that they have as well to find out as much as you can about that child so you can meet their needs in the best way.

**Jo:** I love that you bring the parents in on that journey too, because obviously they've been with these children from birth, so they know certain cues and things as well. I guess for me too, it was understanding and unpacking what my daughter's responses were, because I had an educator who knew what was going on.

## **Jo's daughter's experience of mainstream vs special needs school**

**Jo:** We went through mainstream school with her and we got to year five, and the teacher literally threw his hands in the air and said, 'I don't dunno what else I can do for her.' And it was that grave awareness to go, okay, I know my daughter's not at the same level as all the other children, but I wanted her to have as much of a normal environment as possible. I wanted her to feel like she was just like anybody else. But that moment was recognising that in a normal school environment, she was the one that everybody had to look after. All the other students were going, 'Bethany, don't do that, don't do this. You have to do this now. You can't do that.' And so she was often being babysat by her peers rather than actually feeling like a peer. The minute she stepped into a special needs classroom, she flourished, she really did. And the thing that spoke to me more was that in this room, she was the able-bodied person. She was the one who could be the helper. She was the one who actually just suddenly had a role and a purpose, not the child that needed to be babysat.

## Being a non-parental influence

**Jo:** Can you recall a particular time where you did see something beautiful happen or that you noticed something significant about a young person and you felt blessed by their response?

**Leanne:** I do remember once, when I was working in the high school, we'd have a lot of conversations about life things. So, you know, boyfriend, girlfriends, what it's like to rent a house and all the housework and just everyday things. We spent a lot of time just talking about life things. And I remember one day, one of the girls just turned to me and she said, 'oh, I wish you were my mum.' I did feel kind of really honoured and blessed by that.

**Jo:** I guess being a parent myself, I do notice that there are significant adults in my daughter's life, and that's really important. And I consider them like the favourite aunt or like a special friend. But I guess that the challenge for parents is that, when they're not in school, we are with them all the time. So quite often us as parents are just exhausted from having to try so hard. So I can see why that special bond significant relationship is really important, as well as the parent relationship.

**Leanne:** Definitely.

## Simple Faith

**Leanne:** And one other thing I really love that I've come across is just that real simple childlike faith. Because I often find these young people, they can be so honest. And they'll just say it as they see it, good or bad, no political correctness. But their faith, it's just, 'yep, I love God. The end.' There's nothing more to it. Nothing less, nothing more, that is it. And I love that they can just be very accepting, very trusting, that's amazing.

**Jo:** What a wonderful blessing to not be limited by fear. To be able to say it as it is. Because they haven't quite figured out that somebody might not get what you're saying. But to be actually be able to express their faith in such a simple way.

**Leanne:** Yeah. That's amazing, that's been beautiful to see. I know it's blessed many other people too.

## Faith Through the Challenging Times

**Jo:** So, tell me what helps get you through some of the trickier moments of teaching young people with special needs?

**Leanne:** I think sometimes you can feel quite burnt out and exhausted and it's just, what am I gonna do next? I just dunno where to go. And that's when you've got to lean into your peers and your colleagues. Also, me as a Christian, I'd lean into God in those times and just say, 'I don't know what to do.' And it's letting go and letting God, that whole thing.

I also think it's really wise that teachers have a break every 10 weeks so you can just leave things behind and concentrate on your own wellbeing and look after

yourself for a little while. But yeah, it is a giving profession that is for sure. And I suppose I feel very blessed to have a family, a loving husband and children and friends that I can also lean into and rely on.

**Jo:** So, you mentioned about your faith and that you do go to God for help. What does that look like?

**Leanne:** Lots of prayer in the middle of the night when you are still and calm and able to do that. I think talking to other people as well, other Christian people. It has been interesting 'cause most of my career has been in the public system, but it's interesting how God has just provided other Christian people to be around. And even with non-Christian people, there'll be conversations and things that happen that just nurture me and fill my cup. So yeah, God has it organised.

**Jo:** I love that. And does he have a particular word for you? Is there any scripture that you go to in those hard times?

**Leanne:** Matthew 11:28, *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.'* And then a similar one that goes with that Philippians 4:6-7, *'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God.'* It is just that handing over, *'I've done what I can do, and thank you for giving me gifts to do things. I need to rely on you.'*

**Jo:** I love to see that that tension, the balance of what you're saying. Because initially you were talking about taking on the burden for yourself and actually taking on the responsibility, like, *'what else could I have done for this child?'* But in the same light, you're looking at your limitations as well and going, *'actually I have done the best that I can and now I can hand it over to God to take over, to be in control.'*

**Leanne:** Yeah. And sometimes it takes me a bit longer to get there and I need to stop sooner and ask for help sooner too. But I think that's probably a natural thing, isn't it? We think *'I can do this, I can fix everybody's problems. I can just make it all schmick and beautiful.'* And then when it doesn't go that way, then it's, *'oh, I actually can't do this on my own.'*

**Jo:** Well, the reality is that we can't always solve the problem, can we?

**Leanne:** Yeah. That's a big life lesson, I think, isn't it? Letting go. And as a parent too, it's the same thing. You just wanna fix, make everything nice and smooth, easy cruisy. And you just can't, and it's not good for the person anyway. That's not teaching them to be independent and to learn skills.

**Jo:** It may just be that their greatest need is just to be heard or just to be known, or just to feel like they belong. And if they've got that, then you've done your job.

**Leanne:** Yeah, that's right. I think that's part of why I do what I do. I really believe everybody's created as a unique individual. Everybody's loved, whether they know

it or not by God, and whether they acknowledge that. But yeah, he's got it in in his hands. He's got us in his hands.

## **How to be more inclusive**

**Jo:** What do you think people need to know about working with students with special needs?

**Leanne:** One thing to remember: everyone has a story, and sometimes, with a disability, it might be visual, it might be on the outside, it might be physical, something we can see, or it might be internal or something we can't see, but it shouldn't matter.

We still accept and love that person because they're a person and they've been created to be them. So, we don't know what their story is. We don't know what's happened to them prior, but we still love and accept them for who they are and for being them. So, I think it's just important to not judge and have those preconceived ideas.

**Jo:** What we want it to be is an environment where everybody feels like they're part of the same community. And so, in a school environment and a church environment, you know that anybody can come into this space and feel welcomed.

**Leanne:** That's right. We often think of it as like, you've got a circle, and it used to be, everybody's gotta be in the circle or you're excluded, you're outside of the circle. But I like to think of it as like a dotted line around that circle so you can come in and out as you need to. So, it's up to whatever needs you have that need to be met at that time. You've got that freedom to do what you need to do and it can look different for different people. We are not all gonna look the same. We're not all gonna feel the same and certainly not at the same time. So, let's be more flexible with that. Which I think we are. And we're certainly seeing that in communities and I think in places like our churches, we are getting better at being inclusive. Probably still a long way to go, but that's okay. As long as we are striving towards that, I think that's a good thing.

**Jo:** For people who do struggle with that, who do actually find it quite challenging to welcome a person into a space when you don't know their situation. Are there some things that we can learn from you about how we make a place more welcoming for a person with a special need?

**Leanne:** I think one thing is actually just talking to them if you can and if they can. But at least acknowledging them and being friendly, having a smile on your face, that's an easy thing we can all be doing.

Try not to be afraid. They are a person just like you. They might look different or act different, but they are a person. So, trying to look beyond what you can see perhaps. But I think trying to just connect with them in some way is important. It's also good though, to give them some space to be themselves. Sometimes people don't want you to get too close and they don't feel comfortable if you are in their space. So, it can be tricky. But I think a smile, and you might talk to the carers or

the adults who are with them too to just welcome them and let them know that you are glad that they're there. And have a conversation. You might not get much of a verbal response or even any other response, but that's okay. They can still be hearing, they can still see that you are trying to engage with them.

## Conclusion

**Jo:** Thank you, Leanne, so much for being here for this conversation. I really have enjoyed hearing your story, but also I have enjoyed hearing your heart. I can hear as a teacher, you're a blessing to your community. But thank you for sharing your story today, and I pray that through this conversation, others have been inspired by your story and encouraged to know that we're all God's children, we're all loved, we're all special and significant in his eyes. Thank you for time.

**Leanne:** Thank you.

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