Classroom Adjustments: Vision impairment

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| 00:00:00:00 | MARION BLAZE | I'll give you a story about one of our students years ago, a blind boy who started in secondary school. And within the first few weeks of secondary school, they were having their swimming sports. The visiting teacher said to the phys ed teacher, "OK, can he enter an event at the swimming sports?" And the phys ed teacher thought about this, and came back, and said, "Oh, no, no. I don't think that's possible. I think he might sink to the bottom of the pool, and we might not see him." Had all these concerns about the child's safety. |
| 00:00:26:22 | SERPIL | This is Marion Blaze, manager of the Statewide Vision Resource Centre in Victoria. |
| 00:00:32:04 | MARION BLAZE | So, the visiting teacher said, "OK. If we have a volunteer at the end of each pool just to watch him and no-one else, can he enter any event?" And the whole school saw him come last in the freestyle, but he competed. |
| 00:00:44:04 | SERPIL | Brilliant. |
| 00:00:45:04 | MARION BLAZE | Absolutely. And the phys ed teacher was so taken with this that he went back and looked up the Paralympic equivalence for times for people who are totally blind, which this boy was, and discovered that because of the time that this student had done in the freestyle, he actually qualified to go to the interschool swimming sports. And I think he qualified to go to the regional swimming sports and so on. It snowballed. But the big effect on the school was that the school community saw this kid participating, saw that he was capable, saw that he had the initiative to go up to the phys ed teacher and say, "I want to do this," and was really capable of doing it. So, it was a really successful outcome. |
| 00:01:29:04 | SERPIL | I've got goosebumps from that story. That's such a brilliant outcome. |
| 00:01:34:07 | SERPIL | I love that story. It proves one of the easiest adjustments we can make is our perception of others. I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. We'll hear more from Marion in this episode as we explore adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with vision impairment to participate on the same basis as their peers. You'll also meet Sam, a high school student who is blind, his mum Lisa and a teacher who specialises in classroom adjustments for students with vision impairment. |
| 00:02:16:22 | SERPIL | So, Marion, could you tell me about the range in diversity of vision impairment that students are likely to experience. |
| 00:02:24:11 | MARION BLAZE | OK, they range from children who are what we call in the partially-sighted range, that is they have low vision. Or children who are legally blind, which doesn't mean they're totally blind. But that group includes the children who are totally blind. And the impairments are caused by a number of things. They can be genetic conditions, the onset can be from birth, or it can be later on. Sometimes with degenerative conditions, they're not diagnosed until the children are in mid primary or later, and they gradually lose vision. If vision impairment is their only impairment - and there are some children who have intellectual disability as well, other impairments as well - but the child who's just vision impaired, there is no impediment to them learning the curriculum alongside everyone else in the classroom as long as adaptations are made and they have the skills to use the technology or the adaptations that are provided to them. |
| 00:03:16:20 | SERPIL | Marion points out that the easiest, cheapest and often the most effective adjustment we can make for students with vision impairment is to simply change the way we speak. |
| 00:03:27:15 | MARION BLAZE | Using people's names is a simple strategy. If there's a class discussion going on, using the students' names as they speak so that the child can get to know those voices and where they are in the classroom. Every classroom is different, of course, but if we take the example of a young child starting in school, perhaps in prep, the students usually come and sit down. A good idea at the beginning of the school day is to just say, "OK, who's in the room?" And everybody says their name from their place in the room, so that everyone in the class knows where everyone is. And then the teacher would describe what they're going to do that day, and perhaps point to what they've written on the board as the timetable, but also read what they've got on the board and describe where activity things are. So, if there's going to be a group for activities, to describe where the materials are quite carefully, rather than saying, "It's over there." Saying the activity box is on the teacher's table at the front of the room, then making sure that the students, especially the blind student, know where those materials are. We'd like the teachers to verbalise as much as possible in that way. |
| 00:04:36:15 | SAM VALAVANIS | Hi. I'm Sam. I'm 16 years old, and I am vision impaired. |
| 00:04:45:02 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, last year, when I did maths, I had a really good teacher who would explain everything to me. So, even if he was explaining things on the board, he would still tell me what to write and what was going on. And if I didn't understand anything, I could just put my hand up. And when everyone else is working, he'd come around to me and tell me in great detail what he was doing so I could understand it. |
| 00:05:06:15 | SERPIL | Sam has been totally blind from the age of 4 when he was diagnosed with cancer in both eyes. He doesn't like dogs, but he loves his pet rabbit and he's quite a good singer. |
| 00:05:18:13 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, I do like this song that I've been singing called 'No Such Thing' by John Mayer and it goes... (SINGS) "Welcome to the real world, she said to me condescendingly. Take a seat, take your life. Plot it out in black and white." Something like that. |
| 00:05:37:02 | SERPIL | Sam was totally blind when he started school and he's been in mainstream schools for most of his education. |
| 00:05:43:22 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, for the first year of school, I went to the Vision Australia School in Burwood. But for the second year, when I was in grade one, I was in a mainstream school part-time. So, my teachers had to adjust things so I could read them and take part in the classwork. So, they would have to get things done in braille. I would have a teacher's aide who would write things up in braille on a special typewriter type machine. And then they would give that to me and I'd be able to participate in classwork. |
| 00:06:13:13 | SERPIL | Sam's mum Lisa says he's a whiz with braille and the associated technology, but it can make it challenging to provide him with support. |
| 00:06:22:02 | LISA VALAVANIS | It's hard because it's not like I can go to Sam and say, "Show me what you're doing." Because I don't read braille, a lot of it is in digital format, anyway. So, I rely on Sam to be able to tell me where he needs a little bit of help and support. And if it's something that his dad or I can't help him with, then knowing where to go to is the next choice, knowing that he can go to his teacher's aides or his visiting teacher, or get the help or support from his teachers that way. |
| 00:06:46:12 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, we have certain SSG meetings. Student Support Group, I think it stands for. And some teachers and my teacher aides and the integration aides will talk to my parents about how the teachers are coping with my adjustments and everything. |
| 00:07:01:15 | LISA VALAVANIS | And his teachers will actually put together a report of just how he's going, travelling for that term and what he needs to, perhaps, look at doing differently. Also, parent-teacher interviews, as with any other child as well. But the school's really good. They will get in touch with me if there's anything that's an issue. I keep constant contact with his teacher's aides as well. So, if there's a particular piece of homework that he needs to do that they're concerned about or something they need to let me know, they'll email me during the day just to give me a heads-up as to what's going on. |
| 00:07:37:20 | SERPIL | So, does the school approach it a bit like a collaborative process? Like the integration aide, do they take on board some of the suggestions that you make? |
| 00:07:45:08 | LISA VALAVANIS | Yeah, they definitely do, which is good. It's very much... We're all there in helping support Sam get his education. It's not just about I send him off, and the teachers do what they do. They'll take on board my ideas and really appreciate my feedback. And vice versa too. If I see things that the teachers are doing really well, I'll speak to my husband about it and even look at maybe integrating it somehow in helping him around the house. Yeah. So, it's really a group effort. |
| 00:08:27:00 | SERPIL | Sam's blindness is a little bit unusual in that most students with vision impairment do have some level of vision. For these students, Marion Blaze suggests making some visual adjustments, but not necessarily the changes you might think. |
| 00:08:44:03 | MARION BLAZE | I think a generalisation that the public make about someone with vision impaired is you make everything bigger and brighter. Whereas, there are quite a number of vision impairments that people will function better in lower illumination because they're very glare-sensitive. So, things that are too bright are really quite uncomfortable and painful and harder to see. So, on a device, they can actually make a negative image. So, instead of having a white background, which is glary, and black print, they can have the opposite. A black background with white or yellow print, which is much less glary and much more comfortable for them.  Some schools do enlarge work for their kids. We prefer them, if they can, to use some sort of magnification because it's better to use that and develop that skill than have to wait for someone to enlarge something for you. Again, it's the independence thing. So, use of optical magnifiers. We call it magnification in your pocket. It's just something that you can have on hand. If your technology is not with you, pull out a magnifier and you can access something that was a little bit too small to access before.  And even for distance work, for looking at the whiteboard, there are little telescopes, sort of half a pair of binoculars we call a mini-scope or a monocular, that students can pull out of their pocket to read a street sign or a bus number or the board work in the classroom. |
| 00:09:57:21 | SERPIL | Another good reason to avoid enlarging text for students is that it might not actually be helpful. |
| 00:10:04:05 | MARION BLAZE | Some children have tunnel vision. And if you have tunnel vision and you make the print larger, you're seeing fewer of the letters and words at a time. So, it can actually be detrimental for some children to enlarge what they're doing or magnify what they're doing. If you can increase the contrast in a visual task, it sometimes does not need to be larger or closer. |
| 00:10:23:09 | SERPIL | And Marion suggests we watch out for tired eyes as well. |
| 00:10:27:04 | MARION BLAZE | Vision fatigue is a big one. It's a balance too because we don't necessarily want teachers to give children fewer tasks because of their fatigue issues because as children go up levels in secondary school, the rigor of what they need to do in schooling is what it's all about. They really do have to keep up with the other kids. So, for a teacher to say that their vision-impaired child doesn't have to actually do as much work or as many tasks as another child because of their fatigue issues makes things difficult. So, we often recommend to teachers that, if they can, to alternate visual activities with non-visual activities so that kids can get a break from that. |
| 00:11:06:11 | SERPIL | So we've got plenty of adjustments that could be made in the classroom for students with vision impairment and we've barely even touched on braille. There's a reason for that. Some eye conditions are degenerative, which means vision impairment will get worse until braille is a necessity rather than an option. |
| 00:11:25:06 | MARION BLAZE | Sometimes, the situation is that they've been recently diagnosed and know that the vision is going to get worse, and that's a huge burden to carry as a young person and as a family. They don't know when and if is the good time to let their friends know that they have a vision impairment and might be blind in a few years. Braille is something that's going to keep being essential for children who are blind or people who are blind because it's the only way that they can actually access written material quite independently - independently of technology and independently of other people. And they can read and reread and skim as anyone does with the text. A lot of our students are using braille notetakers, which are little personal computers that have a refreshable braille display. So, instead of having print on a monitor, they have a line of braille with little plastic dots that come up under their fingers to give them that line of braille for every line of text that would be on the screen. And they can store entire books on it and, in fact, they can store hundreds of books on that device. It can be their calculator. It can be their word processor. It can be their dictionary, and so on. |
| 00:12:30:18 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, yes, there's a whole heap of technology there. There's a thing called a Mountbatten Brailler, which is like a big typewriter, which the teacher can type into a computer and it comes up as braille on paper. There's also a little laptop-type device called a BrailleNote. Teachers can type things into a computer, into a file, and then can give it to me on a USB, and I can plug it in and I can read it in braille. |
| 00:13:01:16 | SERPIL | Di Bennett is a teacher who specialises in supporting students with vision impairment, and their teachers, at several schools. When braille is being used, she recommends offering students as many braille resources as you can. She says one of the easiest things you can do is to learn the letters A to J in braille, which also happen to be the numbers one to zero. |
| 00:13:25:24 | DI BENNETT | I have a little prep student who wouldn't put his fingers on the braille paper. Was very resistant to learning it. Just with persistence and, you know, having an aide that was committed to learning braille with him, anything that was going out to the other students, she'd make sure that there was a braille copy on hand ready to go at every step of the way. She set up her classroom at the very beginning of the year with braille all around it. She had the braille alphabet on the walls so that the other kids could see what braille look like. All the chairs were labelled with braille. All the tables had braille on it. So, it was a complete immersion in braille and her willingness to look at, "How can I adapt this for him?" So, he was always given a worksheet at the same time as the other students, or we found a way of adapting the worksheet so that it was replicating what the other students were doing so that it would give the same outcome. |
| 00:14:24:18 | SERPIL | So, it sounds like it was a very inclusive environment. So, not only was he getting specific support, but the other students were involved in the process as well. |
| 00:14:33:20 | DI BENNETT | They loved it. You know, they would come and watch him do braille, or, you know, I'd say to him, "Could you show somebody how to do the letter N?" And he'd do the letter N. So, he felt important. And the other kids absolutely loved having him in the classroom. |
| 00:14:47:10 | SERPIL | In addition to braille, Lisa points out that one of Sam's favourite resources is a tactile map. |
| 00:14:53:15 | LISA VALAVANIS | He actually can have prepared for him tactile maps. So, Sam loves geography and loves things like train networks. He has quite a few tactile maps at home that he has of different rail networks and systems of different countries and different cities. He can get maps of anywhere... It's tactile, so he can feel the layout of the country, what the shapes of the country are like, even topography, and things like that. |
| 00:15:21:14 | SERPIL | Outside of the classroom, Sam uses a cane to move around the school safely. He's also got access to some modified sport equipment to help him participate in PE. |
| 00:15:32:09 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, for sports, I mainly have balls with bells in them, or I might have a ball with a beeping sensor in it that beeps so I can know where to hit it or balls with rattles in them. |
| 00:15:47:16 | SERPIL | That's pretty clever. I wouldn't ever have thought of that. How does it work? So, you hear the ball bouncing towards you, and then you can react? |
| 00:15:55:01 | SAM VALAVANIS | I can react, or in the case of other sports, with basketball, someone hits my cane onto the backboard inside the ring of the basket and I know where to throw the ball. |
| 00:16:08:18 | SERPIL | And when he goes further afield, all he needs is a guide to help him move around safely. |
| 00:16:14:01 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, usually, when I have an excursion or a camp, a teacher aide will come along with me because I have multiple teacher aides. One will come with me, and they will help me with things like getting around and participating in group activities and things like that. So, I can definitely participate in that stuff. |
| 00:16:31:09 | SERPIL | All of this is good news for Sam's mum Lisa who is worried at times about his ability to socialise with other students. |
| 00:16:39:05 | LISA VALAVANIS | Obviously, a lot of social situations go on at lunchtime and morning tea time. And at that stage, that's when his teacher's aides are having a break as well, and they're not there to be on top of him during those situations. He needs to learn social skills himself. With a vision impairment, if you can't see where the kids are, unless they come to you, it is really hard. |
| 00:17:02:01 | MARION BLAZE | It's a fine line between preparing a school for a child who is blind or has a low vision and bringing lots of attention to them as well. But it can be a social issue for the kids. It can be very socially isolating if they don't have the skills to actually make approaches to other kids. |
| 00:17:18:16 | SERPIL | Like most disabilities, while there are many similarities, every individual experience is unique. So when you're planning adjustments to support a student with vision impairment, it's important to discuss those adjustments with the student and their parents. |
| 00:17:34:08 | LISA VALAVANIS | You might get two kids with the exact same vision impairment, but they may have totally different ways of doing things. So, I think it's a case of being very open-minded, not making assumptions, getting as much help and support from the support networks within the school and, also, external from the school. So, that may be speaking to teacher's aides, speaking to visiting teachers. Even just looking on the internet, looking at simple things, like maybe looking at Facebook posts about vision impairment. |
| 00:18:02:11 | SERPIL | And if you'd like Sam's advice, his favourite adjustment is simply more time. |
| 00:18:08:17 | SAM VALAVANIS | Well, I think the most successful ones have definitely been the test conditions because I get longer time. And the tests are harder for me because I have to concentrate more than the average student. So, I have longer test times and that helps me with doing difficult tests and exams and things. |
| 00:18:37:11 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
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