**Teaching in special education and inclusion – Rachael Dougherty**

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**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Welcome to today's podcast where we're talking about teaching in special education schools and settings, and why it's such a rewarding career.

Joining us is Rachel Dougherty, Principal of Western Suburbs Special School. Rachel will share insights into the unique joys and challenges of working in this field. If you've ever considered stepping into a special education or inclusion teaching role, this episode is for you.

Thanks for joining me today, Rachel.

**Rachel Dougherty:** No problem at all Virginia. Happy to be here.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Can we start with the basics? Where are there the opportunities for special education and inclusion teachers in Queensland state schools?

**Rachel Dougherty:** There's many opportunities, across all sectors actually, for special education and teachers of inclusion. Inclusion is everybody's business, so it's doesn't really matter what setting your working in, whether it's a primary setting, a high school setting, or a special school setting. Inclusion is of paramount importance for all teachers to include within their tool box of implementing high quality teaching and learning programs.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And why do you think that is of paramount importance?

**Rachel Dougherty:** It's important for us as educators to understand what are the reasonable adjustments that student needs for them to access the curriculum. As educators, it's really important to understand the curriculum firstly, but it's also super important to understand the student, and who they are as a learner, and what are the best pedagogical approaches, or reasonable adjustments that I can make to support them to be that conduit to access it without any inhibitions, or barriers. So, it's just taking those things away so that that student has access to reach their full potential.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** So, what inspired you to teach in this area?

**Rachel Dougherty:** I started my career, teaching in primary settings. I always gravitated towards students that, I suppose, just struggling to connect with the learning. I ended up saying to one of my principals at the time, you know, I've got this lovely boy in my class and I just, I don't know what it takes to connect the learning to him. The principal at the time said you need to find out who he is as learner, what makes the learning exciting and how to engage him authentically. So I actually went off and did some further study in special needs and special education. I've really enjoyed it, since then. Just making small differences that can make huge impacts on our students lives.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** It sounds like quite a specialist area. Are there specific qualifications that are required to be able to teach in special education schools or special education settings?

**Rachel Dougherty:** No, there's not. I think there's a bit of a misconception out there, that people think you, you know, you have to have specialist university qualifications to work in a special school.

Good teachers are good teachers in all settings, whether you work in a primary, a high school or a special school, it's just around being the very best educator you can be to meet the needs of the students that you’re working with daily. You just need an openness to learn, to be student focused with everything you do and to put those students at the heart of your teaching and learning.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** I think lots of people would be surprised to know, that they don't need any extra qualification.

**Rachel Dougherty:** Yeah, I agree. I think that, that is a misconception out there. One that we’re, very much trying to clarify for everybody, to open the doors to lots of opportunities for teachers to expand their breadth and depth of teaching as well. You can learn from others who maybe have more experience in that field. You can engage in mentoring and induction processes. It is a misconception a lot of younger teachers coming out of universities, graduates, early career teachers etc or new to special education have that ‘Oh I can’t go into a special school setting I haven’t done special education at uni’. But it’s not the case at all and in fact, we have found that teachers coming from, primary settings or high school settings with an openness to learning, make fantastic special education teachers.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What kind of skills have you been able to develop working in the special education field?

**Rachel Dougherty:** I think there's been lots of opportunities for me to develop a variety of skills in special education. I feel as a special educator that I am constantly on my learning edge to new skills.

Definitely, one of the things that I've put at the centre would be that, student centeredness and that we are developing the student as a whole. So looking at working as part of that multi-disciplinary team, the skills of being able to clearly articulate what the student's goals are and how the other team members would be supporting the development of those goals alongside the teacher. So definitely the skill of being able to work within a larger team setting, that we have a student in front of us, but what comes with that student is; occupational therapists to physiotherapist, a speech language pathologist, teacher aide, teacher, the family, and that's not even to mention all the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) providers, outside the school gates that would be working with that student. So those skills of being able to lead with and through others, to achieve goals for that person, that student, is a huge skill set that I feel like I've learnt over the years.

I've also just learnt the skill of really that deep empathy and when we put that student at the centre, and we look at that student from different perspectives. It's having that empathetic lens to be able to say, what does this student actually need to achieve next in their learning, and what are we as educators going to do to get them over the line?

So I also think one of the skills I've developed is my own communication skills over the years and that's due to liaising and engaging with a variety of teams to support that student. But communication also in terms of that student, is what did they need to have autonomy as a communicator and so another skill I've learned along my journey is the use of assistive technology and alternate communication systems and not just me learning about those, but me, working with that larger team of speech language pathologists, and the family and the student and the teachers and the teacher aides to upskill all of us to say, *‘what can we do to support this student to become as autonomous as they can possibly be?’* And often that's teaching them explicitly some alternative communication systems, using symbol based or assistive technology to support them, to say what they want, and when they want.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And do you think these skills have helped progress your career?

**Rachel Dougherty:** I think definitely they have. I've really been able to become much sharper and narrower in my skills within a special education setting. But in saying that, these skills are transferable across all school settings, there are students, just within my school now that are also in the school down the road in the primary setting and the high school down the road, so I do know now the skills that I've been able to really focus on at a deep level, within that team approach, the multidisciplinary work, the communication parts, the empathy. They’re all skills that any educator and leader needs to have whichever setting your working in. So definitely.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What kind of strategies or experience do you hope teachers have when they start at your school?

**Rachel Dougherty:** I would hope that they have an openness to learning, would be the first one, that they see themselves as part of a bigger team that we're not a siloed approach, and you know no schools really are, but particularly in a special school where we have a number of stakeholders supporting each of our students, externally and internally within our school systems and structures.

I suppose, I would like them to have, you know, this strategy, that I'm a member of a bigger team and that I’m working across and with others to best meet the needs of each individual student that is in my class. So definitely that I bring a certain skill-set as a teacher and as an educator to support my students, but there's a team of others that I will work with, that have got specialist knowledge and experience that I need to leverage off, to be able to maximise the learning opportunities for that student in my class.

I really am hopeful as well that an early career teacher coming into my school gets that feeling of support and, and excitement because you make a real difference to our students. Like I said at the start, those small actions that can have big impacts on our learners, that brings a real sense of accomplishment and, feedback to yourself that you can make a huge difference to this, not just the student's life, but for their family’s life.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What advice would you give to teachers considering teaching in special education schools and settings?

**Rachel Dougherty:** It will be the best decision that you've made in your career, that it definitely is one of those sectors that gives back as much as you give in and that you give forward. So, I always say that you get as much out of an experience as you put into it.

I know and have seen so many teachers grow, not just personally but professionally, in their careers as well from working within a special education setting. It really is the place where you feel you are making such a significant difference to the outcome of a student's life. Sometimes we don't see huge gains in a short period of time, but when you step back and you look at how far that student has come across a number of years or learning junctures, it's a real positive feeling, because you can see that you were a part of that and not just a part of that for that year of their Grade 3 class, but that you were a team player in a number of years, with that student working across the school. And just seeing them graduate to get sponsored employment and to get into different workplace settings and for their junior teachers to kind of think, wow, I put all that work in but look at what the outcome was. Which was a wonderful full picture for them to see.

There's lots of experiences and learnings that, that coming into special education settings will benefit all teachers, you know, you'll have so many more tools in your toolbox no matter what sector you're working across. There's lots of leadership opportunities within our sector as well, and I think overall personally and professionally, it will be a wonderful decision and something like that you will be really glad that you made.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Thank you for being so honest about what it's like working in these settings. It does sound like it’s been a very rewarding for you.

**Rachel Dougherty:** Yeah, it definitely has and I suppose, you know, I don't want to sugar coat it and think that and give the impression that it's all easy work. It is hard work but I always say, that it's the right work and if you do it the right way then it will benefit the students in our care for them to leave school having more choice, more autonomy, it's definitely rewarding work.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Thank you for your time, Rachel. It’ s been really interesting talking to you about this sector.

**Rachel Dougherty:** Thanks, Virginia. I've really enjoyed the chat and the challenging questions, so thanks very much.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** If you're interested in finding out more about the opportunities for beginning and experienced teachers in special education and inclusion settings, visit the Teach Queensland website.

**Announcer**: You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** The Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the Elders, past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.