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## **The Digital Access Show — Verbatim Transcript**

### **Transcript**

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### **Introduction and Guest Overview**

**Narelle:** Hello, welcome to another episode of The Digital Access Show. God, I've got to come up with some more introduction wording because that is the same every time. Anyway, I do have a different shirt on, so it is a new episode. We've been looking at education and we've been looking at the benefits of technology today. Now, I'm taking it one step further today. Our guest is a teacher, and I believe he's a relief teacher now down in Victoria. And we're really looking at where we've come from, particularly with autism, to where we are now. What are the changes? What are the benefits? And this links back into when we were talking with Belinda Vezey-Brown two weeks, three weeks ago, and Coach Aandi last week, with the computers and gaming and the benefit, and what's happening in the education sector to help people with disabilities. So Clinton Hale, from Specialist Mobility Services, is your side gig, and you are a teacher by trade. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

**Clinton:** Thank you, Narelle. It's a pleasure to be here.

### **Clinton's Background in Teaching**

**Narelle:** Clinton, tell us a bit more about your background, because you do have an interesting background because you were not a teacher originally.

**Clinton:** No, I'm actually an academic. I'm a human evolutionary geneticist by training. That's why it was my first, my passion, and still is my passion. I did that for quite a little while, then I left academia, did a few jobs around the place, different types of things. And the last thing I moved into was... I've always enjoyed teaching

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when I was at university. I enjoyed teaching and always enjoyed training. So then I went back and did a Master of Teaching back in, hang on, 2010, at the University of Melbourne, and then went straight into a school in the western suburbs here in Melbourne.

**Narelle:** Fantastic. Primary or high school?

**Clinton:** Secondary.

## **Changes in Neurodivergent Education**

**Narelle:** Secondary, yeah. One of the things, I mean people are aware I have a son that's autistic and I have an ADHD son plus the so-called normal one. Well, I always think my kids are the best anyway. But one of the things that interested me, my sons are in their 30s now. And I'm wondering about, what is the difference in the last 20, 25 years since my kids are in school to what's happening now? So my eldest son could never sit still in the chair. So his chair continually bounced. And he got a lot of detentions for it and he struggled with the assignments. And he struggled with comprehension. Give him something factual, it was easy for him. He had no problems. But then when you had to justify what the answer is, I'm thinking mathematics here, he couldn't do it. He could tell you, but he couldn't write it down. So in the late 90s into the 2000s, when my kids were at school, to now, what have been the changes in the education sector that have made it easier for people that are neurodivergent? What's the difference?

**Clinton:** Well, I can only talk about Victoria. I don't know what's happening in the other states. And I can only talk about from 2010 onwards. I finished high school in 1976, and I remember then the kids were the strange kids, as they called them, and caused lots of trouble and nobody knew what to do with them. But even when I was doing teacher training at University of Melbourne in 2010, there was very little about divergence. We talked about disability, but not divergence. There wasn't much training about how to cope with these situations. You were presented with scenarios and asked, what would you do in this situation?

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**Narelle:** Yeah.

**Clinton:** So that's the situation. I wasn't taught. I first started teaching in the western suburbs. I stayed at that school for the whole time. I didn't change schools, because the school was a very good school. It's very much school driven about how things are done. The principals and the senior staff lead the dialogue. And if they're clued up about inclusiveness and diversity, then something will be done. I hear stories even now of children at schools where nothing is done about neurodiverse kids.

**Narelle:** Oh, wow. That's sad.

**Clinton:** It is sad. And it's totally dependent on who the principal class is and what their beliefs are. It also depends on resources. At our school, they have an inclusion unit. This is about three or four teachers and accessory staff, who are called teacher's aides. We had lots of students who would have a teacher's aide follow them around for the whole day. We as teachers had to know who was in the class and what their needs were. It's about modifying the task for the student. That's the big difference, and that's happened within the last eight years, I'd say.

## **Teacher's Aides and Student Support**

**Narelle:** How do the kids take having teacher's aides follow them around? Because if you've got a neurodivergent child, and I know my children refused to have anything to do with the teacher's aide, the special ed teachers. They just wouldn't have a bar of it. I'm talking 20 years ago now. What is the difference now? Do the kids accept it or is it still the same issue?

**Clinton:** Some kids accept, some kids don't. And it also changes from day to day, because as you know, the behaviour of any child changes from day to day. It's not consistent. Just like adults.

**Narelle:** That's it, yeah.

**Clinton:** Some of the kids were very happy to have a teacher's aide with them. Others didn't like it. At our school, the principal said if a student wants to leave the

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class, the student can, but they can only leave if the teacher's aide follows them. They can't go by themselves. Or they can come to the coordination office for their year level. I was a year 7 coordinator for most of the time I was teaching. Any child who had an issue would come to us. If a child had to be disciplined, they would come to us. We're the ones who contacted the parents.

**Narelle:** So really, if a child gets overwhelmed, they could go to this coordination office and settle quietly?

**Clinton:** Yes. And we were right next door to welfare, well-being. Anything that was really blowing up, or where you could tell the child was very upset, we would go straight to them. And we had a child psychologist at school all the time.

## **Managing Overwhelm and Learning Plans**

**Narelle:** Wow. That is different. One of the things that used to frustrate me is when my boys got overwhelmed with anything. It could be just something as simple as comprehension, a reading task, and they couldn't get it. What my boys ended up doing was just not doing anything. How is that handled today?

**Clinton:** We know who the children are and what their needs are, assuming we get the information from the primary schools. That can be an issue sometimes. When we do get the information, those students are seen beforehand, even before they start year 7. They are taken to the well-being section and plans are worked out. Every child is different.

**Narelle:** So it is even looking at the likes and dislikes of the child to structure what they're learning?

**Clinton:** Yes. But you have to get the teachers to do it. Some teachers still will not follow. The teacher's classroom is their kingdom, basically. Even though they're told a student needs this, this and this, some will say, no, I'm doing it this way.

**Narelle:** Where does that leave the child then? If the teacher says I'm not doing it that way, and the child can't learn that way, where does that leave the child?

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**Clinton:** That has happened. The child came to see the coordinators. The coordinators took it further up to the principal class, and the teacher was told they needed to change their attitude because it was in breach of what they were supposed to be doing. The teacher had to change, but had to be forced to by the principal class.

**Narelle:** So you're saying the plans are developed with the child?

**Clinton:** Yes. And the parents.

**Narelle:** And the parents. That's a good point. Because the child is involved in the planning, they're more motivated to do it.

**Clinton:** Yes. It chews up masses of resources. At the moment, the big problem in Victoria is we have a massive shortage of teachers. Some schools don't have enough teachers to teach normal classes. This is another layer on top, which is stretching schools and teachers. You're expected to teach a whole class, but at the same time you're supposed to understand every child's needs and address it.

## **Outcomes for Students**

**Narelle:** What is the outcome for the kids? Are you getting successes out of this? Are you getting much more confident, happier, well-adjusted children that understand the work and are able to leave school successfully and move on to an adulthood that is part of the community?

**Clinton:** Yes. I was at that school for 15 years, so I saw quite a few students go from year 7 to year 12. I remember some of the neurodiverse kids I had in my class, and the difference when they got to year 9 and year 12. They knew how to study. They knew how to do the task. Usually, by then, they were independent and self-reliant.

**Narelle:** Putting the work in at the start brought down those requirements and those needs for the child. Isn't that brilliant? Implementing it's hard and resource-wise it's hard, but the outcome's better.

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**Clinton:** Yes. It's like if you've got an infection or something. You catch it quickly and treat it, the outcome is far more beneficial and over a shorter time period.

**Narelle:** And as a teacher yourself, it must make you feel a lot better as well, that all the hard work you've put in has had a successful outcome.

**Clinton:** Yes. And also all the support we get from well-being, specialist teachers, the child psychologists, et cetera. If the principal and vice principals are supportive and give us tools, resources and time, that is fantastic. Time is the other thing. We are supposed to do so much training in so many different things.

## **Accessibility for Vision and Hearing Impairments**

**Narelle:** What about a hearing-impaired person or a person that's blind? Is it a similar thing for them as well?

**Clinton:** Yes. I can give you two incidents. Many years ago, a student turned up who was vision impaired, and the department straightaway went around and painted every edge in bright yellow.

**Narelle:** Excellent. Brilliant.

**Clinton:** No, it was ridiculous. They just blurred into these bright yellow lines everywhere. They built a couple of staircases and modified some portables for access. About four years ago, a student came in from a private school who used a wheelchair and was slightly deaf. The department built ramps everywhere and put hearing loops in some classrooms. The ramps were compliant and to Australian standards, and an accessible toilet was built. The student loved it because they could get around anywhere.

**Narelle:** So the vision-impaired student, in the literary side of things, in the actual communication, what changes were made there?

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**Clinton:** Instead of printing on A4, we printed A3 with larger font sizes. There was access by other means, such as iPad. They also had a teacher's aide available for some classes.

**Narelle:** What about using things like screen readers? Was that encouraged as well for that student?

**Clinton:** Yes, I think so. I was lucky because of my partner, Mandy. She's an O and M specialist, so I had an inkling of what goes on. But the rest of the staff had no idea. A visiting teacher came along, checked everything, and spoke to a couple of teachers, but didn't speak to all the teachers. I think we had one training session, one hour session. That was it at the beginning of the year.

**Narelle:** Wow. So teachers were really thrown in the deep end as well there.

**Clinton:** Yes.

## **Parent Advocacy and School Communication**

**Narelle:** What is the responsibility of the parents in all of this, with regards to any child with disability?

**Clinton:** Basically, advocate for the child. They don't have to provide resources. It's a government-run school. Let us know of any issues which have happened, or any issues they can see coming. Come forward.

**Narelle:** Teachers would also be dealing with parent burnout, and it happens with any child, not just a person with disability. In a child with disability, it's a lot more burnout because there's a lot more that you have to do and manage.

**Clinton:** It's far more intense. And it never gives up. Sometimes parents would ring up saying so-and-so is in a really bad way today. We also had wards of the state who were also in this situation. You've got multiple issues combined that can really affect a child and their education.

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## **Student Maturity and Year 7 Transition**

**Narelle:** They're 11 or 12 when they enter high school in Victoria, aren't they? They're not ready for the amount of responsibility that sometimes they might have to carry.

**Clinton:** I would disagree with that. It depends. It really is individual. That's the amazing thing about being a year 7 coordinator. You see the range of children. It is the time when children are going through puberty, or some have gone through it, some are going through it, and others haven't even started it yet. There's a great range in capabilities and also in mental and physical maturity. It is a hodgepodge. We used to call it the minestrone soup. Everything was in it, and you didn't know what was going to come next.

## **Impact on Siblings and Family Support**

**Narelle:** The other thing I'm going to throw into all of this, and I know it from personal experience, is the effect that having a sibling with disability has on the other sibling. People don't realise there is a huge effect. You would be dealing with that at the same time.

**Clinton:** Yes. Again, we were lucky. The well-being section of the school is one of the most empathic groups of people I've met. They care for every child, and they make that connection with the child, the parents, and also the siblings. It's not just a child. It's everyone around it. It affects everyone.

**Narelle:** It does. Often the child that has a sibling with a disability doesn't get the care and attention, and it's not that the parent doesn't want to do it. It's just you cannot split your day into 26 or 27 hours. It's physically, mentally and emotionally impossible. My youngest, Dave, is a very successful adult, and I'm incredibly proud of him, but he missed out on time and activities because budgets were stretched. Always in all of this, don't forget there is the sibling of the person with disability, and they need that extra care and attention as well.

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**Clinton:** It is about the fact that different people require different resources. That includes parental attention and teachers' attention as well. Some children dominate. Some teachers get sucked into it and give all their time to certain students. But at the same time, the child has to learn to stand on their own two feet. It's about adapting the learning task so the child has the ability to mature, grasp the concepts and move on.

## **Technology as a Support Tool**

**Narelle:** Technology has made a big difference, hasn't it? Detrimental or beneficial?

**Clinton:** It's a tool. It's like everything else. It can be used for good. It can be used for evil.

## **Advice for Parents, Children and Teachers**

**Narelle:** Clinton, what advice would you give parents, children, teachers that are facing what we're talking about — educating children with disability, the parents having to advocate? What is the one piece of advice that you would say every time?

**Clinton:** Be honest about the child. We want to know everything. Don't hold back. There's nothing worse than having a child come and we think they have this, this, this, and then we find there are other issues underneath which we never knew about until something blows up. Also talk. Talk to the teachers, talk to the school, find out what the school's policies are and what the actual processes are. Ask as many questions as you can and never be scared to ask a question.

**Narelle:** As a parent, I will say, make the teacher your best friend. Make the principal and deputy principal involved. The most successful classes my kids were in were because the teachers, myself, the special education teachers and the principals became a team with the child. It wasn't for the child, it was with the child. That's the difference.

**Clinton:** Just for those schools where the principal class are not very supportive, go to the region. Go above. Don't accept it if the principal or vice principal says, no,

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there's nothing we can do. Don't accept negative feedback or hands up in the air. Go to the region, and they will come down like a ton of bricks on the school. A school's not a fiefdom.

## **Closing Remarks**

**Narelle:** Thank you so much, Clinton. If you like what you're hearing, please like, subscribe, share and review. We love feedback. Next week is David Oram from Atomic Web Strategy, and we're talking about some of the more techo stuff, including audio feedback and keyboard accessibility, which many people do require. We'll see you next week on The Digital Access Show. Bye-bye.

**Clinton:** Bye-bye.

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