

Episode 2.3: Teaching in the World of Special Education with Laura Schwab

Judy Warth: Well, welcome to Disability Exchange podcast hosted by the University of Iowa Center for Disabilities and Development, or the Iowa's UCED, Iowa University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

We are delighted today to be working in partnership with our friends from the Midwest Public Health Training Center, and our guest is Laura Schwab, a teacher from the Iowa City High School, who I've had the great fortune of working with for I'll bet the past nine, almost 10 years. And we're excited to be able to let her share some of her experiences because the purpose of this podcast is we're centering and elevating the voices of people with disabilities through meaningful conversations and connections. So welcome Laura. My co-host today though is.

Laury Scheidler: Laury Scheidler. I am happy to be here with you, Judy, and I am one of the practicum students in the school of social work here at the UCEDD, and I also was a part of ILEND last year, which is the Iowa Leadership Education and Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Program. And now I am here learning from my mentor, Judy.

Judy Warth: Choose your mentors more carefully in the future, my friend.

Laura Schwab: I was going to say I couldn't think of a better person to do that role.

Judy Warth: Well, Laura, would you mind giving our listeners a little bit of a vision of who you are, where, what you do?

Laura Schwab: Sure. I am a special ed teacher at City High School and I'm also an instructional coach in the area of special ed. And I work primarily with City High Special Education teachers, but I also work with some other district special ed teachers as well.

Most recently my background has been with students with intellectual disabilities. We call it a Start 2 ID license, but really what it is is the license to administer alternate assessment and to work with students who are identified as having that very tippy top level of needs in our building. And I also have a BDL license and I've taught students who need behavior supports in the past as well. I started actually in Ottumwa High School as a special ed teacher.

Judy Warth: For our listeners who might not know what a BD and LD license means, what does that mean?

Laura Schwab: BD stands for behavior disabilities, and then LD stands for learning disabilities. And so it's students who are identified as needing academic intervention, and also behavior intervention or social emotional learning is what we call it most recently, and I think that's more appropriate.

Judy Warth: What called you to teach? I mean, what made you decide to teach special education?

Laura Schwab: Well, I had an elementary ed degree when I was fresh out of college at 22, and it was during the recession and I couldn't get a job. And then, so I put my resume out there and Mark Hansen, who used to be a principal at City High actually who was a principal at Ottumwa High School, called me and he was like, "Hey, we need this teacher. I saw your resume." And I was like, "Sure, which elementary school?" And he is like, "It's actually Ottumwa High School in special Education." And so then I was like, "Okay, sure." So we moved down there, we moved to Mount Pleasant, and I still drove an hour and commuted and I taught high school special ed, and I guess the old school term would be like multi-categorical classroom. They

didn't have separate BD, LD, ID licenses at that point. They were just like, here are kids with significant needs, go.

And so then I was like, wow, this is really cool. I like this. So then I got my master's in special ed, and then I came to Iowa City. What drove me, I don't know. It's just these amazing humans who are not run of the mill humans and who I learn more from them than they learn from me. That's just how it is.

Laury Scheidler: When you went over to Ottumwa for it, was there a requirement for you to get endorsed?

Laura Schwab: Yeah. Yeah. So it was called an administrative decision license. So where it was, I had this itty bitty little gen ed special education course, it was three credit hours. They're like, "That counts." And so then I had one year to get 12 credit hours in special education, so I had to pile them on that year. And then from there I got a conditional license. So then I had three years to finish the endorsement, but basically Mark had to sign off that he couldn't find anybody else for the job. And so then they gave me a chance. It was nice of them.

Judy Warth: That was a happy little accident.

Laura Schwab: It's crazy how things just unfold that I could have done it and then thought, "What the hell did I get myself into?" But this is what's meant for me. I think I would've found my way here eventually.

Laury Scheidler: Was that your first year of teaching? Is that how I am to understand it?

Laura Schwab: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I did student teaching in a general education fourth grade classroom in Cedar Rapids. But then, yeah, I hadn't taught professionally before then.

Laury Scheidler: That's pretty amazing, that you could step in your first year into what was unexpected. And also having to take credits that first year.

Laura Schwab: I had a one-year-old baby girl too.

Laury Scheidler: Oh my.

Laura Schwab: And I would drive 30 minutes to drop her off at Fairfield, was the only decent daycare I could find at that time, because Mount Pleasant doesn't have any childcare that was safe. And so then I would drive her 30 minutes and then I'd drive another 30 minutes to Ottumwa. And for two years. I think it's cool. It's a cool memory to look back on, and I learned a lot. I still think about those students and how much they taught me. It's pretty crazy.

Judy Warth: If you were going to pull out the most important lesson that they taught you, what would that be?

Laura Schwab: Ottumwa High School taught ... humility, because I was a paraprofessional in a behavior room at College Community for a little bit, and they had their stuff together there, and I didn't have my stuff together, so I had to learn. I had to take feedback from these students in a way that ... it was a lesson on centering the student and putting my feelings aside. As a 24-year old, you will listen to me. It was like this, I don't need to have control in order to be an effective educator, I just need to reflect and learn every day.

Judy Warth: When I think about working with you, I get to see you in action. And you make me think about what sort of skills do you think our teachers need now, our special education teachers in particular, when they're coming into schools?

Laura Schwab: That's a loaded question, but I think relationship building and structure. I think about Elena Aguilar a lot and listen to her podcasts a lot and how she really centers structure and consistency in the classroom and relationship building both between students to students and students to teacher. You're not going to get anywhere without that. And just having the skills to do that. And then if not, just rely on coaching, it goes back to that humility piece too. Well, that really sucked today. What can I reflect on and how can I come back the next day and try to repair this relationship with this kid?

Laury Scheidler: And when I hear, Laura, your story about building relationship, the structure and consistency, that all sounds like building trust with your students.

Laura Schwab: Yeah, I mean there's all kinds of research that shows that predictability is the key to kids feeling safe in the classroom. And that structure and routine is really important. And it's interesting how we have to write that into accommodations and IEPs sometimes. But really that structure that is good for kids who are at risk, kids on the autism spectrum, regardless of whether they need IEPs or not, kids with anxiety, kids with sensory processing needs, any kind of neuro-divergence. Our autism consultant will come in and coach our staff and say, " Oftentimes when you're neuro-divergent, your cup is full." And it's the inability to predict what's happening next. And so if we can provide that support for all kids, it's immensely helpful for anybody who is neuro-divergent or on the spectrum.

Judy Warth: You've mentioned an array of partners that you work with that make education effective. When you think about who are the critical players in the life of one of your students, who do you see out there?

Laura Schwab: I see IEP case managers on the ground doing the hard work. If a kid misses the bus, they go pick them up. If a kid is anxious, they get them a bean bag to sit in their classroom. If adults in the building are misgendering a kid, they'll send out an email to the staff. It's supports that are outside of the IEP that we just know to provide, because they're supports that are good for all kids. And then we're also working really hard to make sure our IEPs are implemented too. Kids need that point person. They need to know. Teenagers would call it ride or die, somebody who's going to be here greeting them in the hallway, somebody who's going to notice if they don't come to school.

Judy Warth: Laura, as I listened to you, it sounds like you've got roots in disability. You worked as a paraprofessional at College Community, and then you got sucked into the whirling vortex. Has disability always been a part of your world?

Laura Schwab: Not really. Yeah, I don't know. My brother was diagnosed with a rare neurological disease when he was 21, and he's a year younger than me. So that had a sort of explosive presence in my life about 15 years ago or, I don't know how old I am, but that's ... supporting my family and getting him services and it's degenerative, right? And so every year that passes, I'm like, "Oh, I learned this thing that can help." But that's what I like to say to everybody, is that you never know. I mean, you never know when you're going to wake up and this will affect you. And that shouldn't be the reasoning we should be empathetic and inclusive of all people, whether it affects us or not. But I think it's a really good reminder to teenagers, is don't judge kids who walk in with differences than you, because there's different reasons for this. And at one point or another in your life, you're going to run into the need to be empathetic and the need to be inclusive and kind. And so better start doing it now, better start practicing kindness and understanding. I guess.

Laury Scheidler: And that's a really good point, Laura, is having that empathy and understanding, and it sounds like we work so hard to work with our kiddos that have the special needs and helping them and accommodate them to navigate this system, along with the neurotypical. However, what are the schools doing to help those other students work with our students with special needs?

Laura Schwab: This is my favorite thing to talk about. So I'm going to probably try not to ramble, but we did a recent PD for special ed teachers on environmental supports. And one of those big environmental supports we talked about was facilitating peer-to-peer interactions in the classroom to encourage independence from para-educators, because no high school kid wants ... I haven't met one yet, I don't have data, but I haven't met a kid in high school yet who wants a para-educator at their feet throughout the whole school day.

And so what better to use peer education? And we have an intervention that we use called Peer To Peer, it's out of Michigan, but I'm a proponent of, this can be facilitated at multiple tiers in classrooms, multiple levels. Like in a math classroom, you can purposely group kids together and then pull one of the kids aside who's doing really well in the class and say, "Hey, these are some supports you could offer this other kid. Maybe you could read the directions out loud with him so that his para can go help some other kids." Or, "He's anxious and he wants to see, he's not copying your paper, he's just looking at your answer. So maybe you could more intentionally work together with him during group work."

But it's just those little things. And then all the way to, we've gotten parent permission to go into a classroom and ask for peer volunteers to intentionally communicate with some of our learners who use AAC devices because all it takes is that one peer who intentionally asks a question and gives that wait time every day, because my friend is going to want to communicate using his device with his friend more than he is going to want to communicate with the para, because friends are important.

And so then that's that education piece. Research also shows that those peers, those peer links who were educating about disabilities and neurodivergence, they're more likely to attend class. They're more likely to pay attention to the academic content because that's their job to help. So I could go on and on about this, but it's something that we definitely are working with our special education co-teachers on in our building to build capacity to implement that into classrooms.

Judy Warth: And for people who don't know what an AAC device is, how would you describe that for them? It's an augmentative and alternative communication device, but can you give people a flavor of that if they have never seen one?

Laura Schwab: Sure. So not every student, not every human can communicate verbally using their voice, but that doesn't mean that they can't expressively communicate or expressively talk. So sometimes we might have a tablet with an app that has pictures supported by words where if they push the picture, then it'll read the word out loud. Some programs are organized more specifically for people with autism, so they know the pathways to get to different types of words easier. And then we have a couple students at City High this year who use Eyegaze devices that where it tracks their eye movement. So they'll look at different words on the screen and it'll read it out loud.

And last year we had a student who ... he came to us with in his expressive communication expectations where the adult would give him two choices and hold up their hands and be like, "Look at the hand that matches your choice." And we were like, "Ah." So we got him a trial through his insurance for an Eyegaze AAC device, and he told his mom, "I love you," for the

first time, and it was pretty powerful. So just those things that ... it's a way to give non-verbally speaking humans access to communication.

Judy Warth: And it sounds like access to relationships too.

Laura Schwab: Yes. And that's what we want. We don't just slap these devices in front of our students and say, "Go." It's just learning a new skill. We do a lot of modeling with these and a lot of instruction on how to find different words, and that's when we can incorporate those peers. There's no reason why a peer can't model to a student how to find a word on their device once a day in class, because I'd much rather listen to a friend when I'm speaking than some old lady named Ms Schwab.

Judy Warth: And Ms Schwab, I think you do a number of other things that help people connect outside of the classroom as well, don't you, from little sparkly things to clubs that are doing recreation and community service sort of things. Can you share a little bit about that with us?

Laura Schwab: Sure.

Judy Warth: It seems to be your theme. Connections.

Laura Schwab: Yeah. We have an organization called Community Inclusion Club that we created in lieu of Best Buddies, because we wanted to create our own local nonprofit with a mission that was a little bit more transition focused and classroom focused too. So we hold monthly events that are inclusive and we facilitate partnerships between kids with disabilities and kids without disabilities. And we have a little events like potlucks, and we just held a basketball game that was inclusive. So we paired with men's varsity basketball and we played a game. It was so cool. One of the boys volunteered to push a wheelchair the entire time. It wasn't even volunteer, it was his duty, it was his job just from the start. Nobody asked him. He was like, "Oh, I got this." And so he developed an actual friendship with this kid, and I think it gives that leadership opportunity.

And also we have leadership team members with and without disabilities for Inclusion Club, and their job is to present about peer-to-peer in classrooms, and their job is to model inclusion in the hallways. And they do peer training about neurodivergence and person-first language versus identity-first language. That's something new that we taught them this year in our training sessions. So just giving them the power to do that.

And then we also, so in Inclusion Club, we have a high school chapter and we have an adult chapter. And so then our adult chapter, Judy and I are on the board of directors for that. And we support inclusion opportunities for people who have already graduated high school. And we hold separate monthly events for that too. It's really fun. You want me to talk about Sparkles?

Judy Warth: Yeah.

Laura Schwab: Okay.

Judy Warth: How can anything with such a dynamic name not be talked about? And plus, the youth who I meet who've been part of that, Laura, it's life changing for them. They leave with a new sense of confidence and self-esteem. And when I hear about it in my work, I know that it must make a big difference in the moment.

Laura Schwab: Yeah, it's my favorite part of the week. Sparkles is an inclusive cheer dance organization. And actually it's pretty nationwide now, but it started in Bettendorf, Iowa, and our trainer actually lives in Coralville. So we do different events. We do cheers at football games or

basketball games. We try not to schedule synonymously with the cheer team because we're different. We're different. We're a club. We're not a sport. Cheer team's already bringing cheer, so we want to bring cheer to events that are a little less noticed. Sometimes we'll do a freshman volleyball or something like that because it's just their charm.

They get everyone excited, and it's a natural thing. We have some student leaders who just took over this year and we're like, "We have to do this." So we practice once a week, and the students are the ones who think of how to make everything physically accessible. I think these students have a natural ability to just make things universally inclusive. Like we're not going to consider this dance move at all, unless every member can do it, which I think is pretty creative and unique because I suck at dance, so I'm proud of them.

Laury Scheidler: So with these two clubs, the Inclusion and the Sparkles, is that something that any school could start up? Or is there an association that you go through to start one up? Or is that something just exclusive to your area?

Laura Schwab: So we have a website. West High School has Community Inclusion Club also. If Liberty wanted to do one, they absolutely could partner with us. Our website is communityinclusionclub.com. And then some other schools do Best Buddies chapters, and those are schools that need a little bit more structure with inclusion, but we're kind of past that here. So yeah, anybody in the Iowa City area could join Community Inclusion Club, either the high school chapter or the adult chapter, whatever is appropriate for them.

And then Sparkles just needs an advisor, like a teacher at the school. And then they're always looking to create training opportunities. They would just need to contact the Sparkles organization. I think it's Generation Spirit. They would go to that website and then they could start up their own chapter wherever.

Judy Warth: And Laura, as I'm thinking about this, I keep thinking that you probably have some wisdom to share for other teachers, because I work with a lot of teachers and there are few that shine in the same way that you sparkle, but who really carry forth values. And you work with a whole array of students with an array of capacities. And I've had the opportunity to learn with Laura in helping some people with some pretty significant issues, access their communities more fully. I mean, if you, you're going to give advice to a young or old teacher like me, what three things do you think are most important for us?

Laura Schwab: Access looks different for every kid, and that's okay. We start by thinking about what a typical person or a typical peer would be expected to do, and then we think about the barriers, and then that's when we can get creative. And just presuming that every student that walks into the classroom is capable of accessing content and then looking at it from there, and then getting creative about supports from there, because there's always support in coming up with modifications and accommodations, but it's just so important to keep that mindset that every single student, even if it's an algebra class or even if it's a chemistry class, every student deserves the opportunity to access what their peers do.

And then, oh gosh, another one. There are ways to get creative with independence for students. It's not always the run of the mill, put a para with them. I think it's just facilitating those peer interactions is really important, whether it's in the community, whether it's at a job site or if it's in the classroom. Those are supports that are really important because it's powerful. And then new teachers should also know that they have support. And it's a long journey, but it's definitely an important one.

It's kind of like going back to that to Glenn and Doyle. It's like, yeah, it's really hard work and we can do hard things. This is important work, and it's work around equity. If our job title is

special education teacher, but we are equity facilitators, we are inclusion facilitators, access facilitators, however we want to say it, but it's coming up with those creative supports and it's hard work, and it's important.

Laury Scheidler: Laura, you mentioned hard work, and when you've had those days where maybe it seems much harder than another day, what would be your suggestion to others of how to revive that energy?

Laura Schwab: Take care of yourself. Because we can't expect teachers to be resilient and keep that mindset if they don't take care of themselves. And creating professional boundaries is really important. Maybe that's a number four, Judy, but it's absolutely okay to understand the parameters of our work and understand the boundaries and hold tight to those. And while still maintaining our why and showing up every day for our students and putting ourselves first, our health and our emotional stability comes first.

Judy Warth: Laura, the question we love to ask everyone who comes on this podcast with us is, it's going to be a long time before this. I'm saying that with a real stern look in my eyes, because you got to keep doing this for a while, but when the time comes, what do you want your legacy to be? What do you want people, when they say Laura Schwab, to remember and think and go, "This is what she taught me?"

Laura Schwab: If we don't advocate for the students who need it the most with tenacity and passion, then who will? And it'd be nice if we worked ourselves out of a job.

Judy Warth: Yeah. I've been jotting down words to describe you, my little word cloud.

Laura Schwab: Oh, geez.

Judy Warth: Yeah. Well, no, I think the notes I took from you is that the critical things I'm hearing from you are to proceed with passion. Don't forget your why. You've talked about being humble and being willing to have to pick yourself up off the ground every now and then go, "Oh, bad idea." And the third is that everyone belongs. We have an inclusive world. And I keep hearing this theme of creative connectedness. Think outside the box and how do we connect people? And that's part of the reason when they said, "Laura's going to come on the podcast," I said, "Oh, pick me, oh, oh, oh, oh."

Because I can say as a working professional that I do my best work when I get a chance to partner with you because you pushed me to think outside the box and you give me tools that I don't have. And my opinion, Laura, maybe not yours, is that really good things have happened as a result of that. So if you had to pick one favorite story about somebody you worked with, if you had to leave today, retire today, is there one individual you feel like you've changed their life? There's lots, but is there one that jumps out at you?

Laura Schwab: Oh, there's a couple here. I mean, I'm just thinking in the moment and last year there was a lot of opportunities, Judy, for you and I to work together in coaching certain behavior plans and thinking outside the box on how can we get these kids work experience? And it took so many meetings and so much advocacy because with high expectations comes high support. I can't say all means all, and not support that. So it's kind of putting out a lot of fires last year. But those two students have been wildly successful. One of them never attended at all last year and has had almost perfect attendance this year. And the other one is attending classes where he spent all day in the special ed room last year because of behavior. So just seeing them in the hallways and seeing them talking to peers and having connections with adults, that's where it's at. And I have to center myself and think about that, the smiles and the peer connections for these guys.

Judy Warth: Well, Laura, we appreciate your time today. We know we pulled you out of class. You're sitting in a closet looks like, with some balloons around you where teachers come and meet. So we appreciate that more than we can quite communicate because we feel it, as we talk about how do we center and elevate the voices of people with disabilities through these conversations and connections, we have to see all the players. And oftentimes it's the educators, the direct support professionals who are doing that, and give our listeners a perspective of the role that we each can play, whether it's in the classroom, whether it's taking part in Sparkles, or the Community Inclusion club.

And if you'd more information on that, you can reach out to us here at Disability Exchange. We can get that to you. Or to Iowa City High School. Or you can hop on Google and look for the Community Inclusion Club, Iowa City, and you should get it, okay?

On behalf of all of us here at Disability Exchange, we thank you, Laura for joining us today. Laury, you survived your first round with Judy. God bless you, child.

Laury Scheidler: You're a wonderful inspiration as well.

Judy Warth: Disability Exchange is a podcast that's produced and presented by the University Center for Excellence in Disabilities, Iowa's UCED, in partnership and collaboration with staff from the Midwest Public Health Training Center at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. You can find the Disability Exchange podcast on Spotify. So thank you all. See you next time.

Laura Schwab: Thank you for having me.

Judy Warth: Thank you, Laura.

Outro Speaker: Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is produced by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, which is housed at the Center for Disabilities and Development at the University of Iowa. Special thanks to Kyle Delveau for the music contribution.