Season 2 Episode 3

“All Means All”- Perspectives and Stories from a Stanford Researcher, Special Education Teacher and Inclusion Specialist.

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SPEAKERS

Lakshmi, Savitha Sundar

Lakshmi 00:04
Impairment is real, but disability exists at the intersection of the individual and the environment. Can we re-examine the environment in which our students are learning? Because we tend to design environments for the mythical average learner and we know that there is no such thing as an average learner. And if we know that then why are we designing environments in which students are bound to fail? Can we not design environments where we know.., who said that a student in kindergarten can only learn they learn to sit down crisscross applesauce, Snowball hands, eyes on the teacher, right? If we can respect the autistic sensory experience, and not seek to extinguish those problem behaviors, because they are ways in which they regulate. I had a student who used to sit on the carpet with his ear to the ground, butt up in the air and make circular motions with his hands but he was listening to everything that was being taught.

Savitha Sundar 01:20
We just listened to Dr. Lakshmi Balasubramanian, who is a lecturer and researcher at Stanford University in the Department of Special Education. Prior to joining Stanford, Lakshmi worked as a special education teacher and inclusion specialist in a large public school district for 14 years. During this time, she spearheaded the design and implementation of inclusive education programs at the school district in grades K to 12. She has also worked as a professional development facilitator nationally and internationally on a variety of topics related to inclusive education and Universal Design for Learning. Welcome to inclusive occupations, sharing stories of not just being invited to the party, but

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dancing. I'm your host Savitha Sundar, I'm a school based occupational therapist. This podcast is a space for OTs and others, who work with children and youth and education to be informed, inspired and empowered to create an inclusive community for the students they serve. I'm so happy to be sharing with you all my friend and mentor Lakshmi Balasubramanian who has expanded my understanding and perspective of several aspects of inclusion of children with disabilities in education, more than any single person I can give the credit to. Every time I talk with her, I end up with two pages of fast scribble notes on a wealth of information and resources that simply float out of her. Lakshmi. I'm so honored to share you with my listeners on the show today. Thank you so much for taking the time to be here with us.

03:14
Thank you so much. I appreciate the kind words. Really do.

Savitha Sundar 03:19
Thank you. So can you share with us about your journey in special ed and your current area of research interest?

03:29
Sure. So you know, my journey, I think, with special ed is kind of really influenced by my identity as a disabled person. My role as a special education teacher, as well as the, you know, like the research that I conducted. So I started working in the Bay Area, in special ed in 2007- 2008. And I think that I was really drawn into this field when I was in India and had gone to some sort of national service scheme's camp. And I was staying with a family and I discovered that they had a child with a disability who they did not want to, you know, who they did not want anyone to know about. And I was, you know, I respected their, their decision. But that kind of got me thinking about children with disabilities, what happens? How are the educated and that's kind of when I decided that when I came to the US, I decided to pursue a master's. And then of course, my own educational journey affected my assumptions, opinions values. Because I'm partially blind person with no night vision and significant loss of peripheral vision. And it afforded me the opportunity to understand how it feels to never see what is written on a board. And and, you know, my repeated pleas were met with open your eyes fully or you need new glasses. And of course of salient to note, I was educated in India and Dubai in the 80s and 90s, where accommodations for the disabled were rare, if not entirely absent. So knowledge of how I see the world prompted has prompted people, you know, they verbalize pity, they, you know, give me empathy, they laugh awkwardly, or sometimes increase the volume of their voice as though that would help me see better. So, these experiences, you know, kind of inform my partial understanding of the reality and he inhabited by disabled individuals. And that kind of prompted me to kind of learn more and delve more, and also gain an understanding of what it is to be disabled. And I say, partial understanding of the world inhabited by my students and their families. So my research is an inclusive education and looking at systems, ...systemic processes to develop practices that support inclusive education. So I look at Universal Design for Learning, tiered systems of instruction and intervention and communities of practice.

Savitha Sundar 06:17

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You know, this is news to me. I have spoken with you so many times, and so many very, very targeted professional questions, I think, and I never personally knew what your personal background and your personal experience with disability, and I can. Yeah, thanks for sharing that. And of course, yeah, and I can totally hear you when you talk about the situations in India. And we grew up around the same time, the same time you went to school, I was probably also in, in school in the 80s and 90s. And I've heard, I mean, I've seen so many people, so many homes, so many orphanages out there exclusively for children with disabilities, and we kind of took it as the reality. Right, that was kind of an accepted norm in our society. Although we felt for it, we tried to do what we could. We just saw it so often,

07:15
it is, you know, very common that students and individuals are shielded in their home. So if they have if they're still with their families, or their institutionalized, so yeah,

Savitha Sundar 07:29
yeah. Yeah, the reality of the Third World countries, I think. So, Lakshmi, this season of inclusive occupation, focuses on exemplars who have taken research on inclusion, put it in action in their schools and communities. Now, can you share with us how you are making inclusion reality in your community as an inclusion specialist?

07:57
So I think that what what we've done here in the school district that I work in, is really taken, in my case, right,They there were some parents who really wanted their students to be included, and I think most parents do. And I utilized their advocacy to kind of build off the inclusion, the inclusive practices. So when I was hired, I was hired to teach kindergarten, first grade, you know, special day class. And they said, you can run it as an inclusion program if you choose. So why would I not choose to do that? And so I worked with my gen ed teaching partners, and we ran like a key one. You know, we call it inclusion. But really what it was was mainstreaming, you know, and so what really used to bother me is, after two years, my students would have been mainstreamed slash included for two years. And then they'd say, Oh, well, you know, your program is only first grade. So now they have to move on to other segregated settings. Now, unless they were really able to go to the general education class, classrooms, at their home schools. Or if their parents were able to really advocate for that they would not be offered that opportunity, and they would end up going to another segregated placement. And I really had trouble with this. So when one of the parents like, pushed, you know, pretty hard, push the district pretty hard and said, No, I think that we need to do something about this. I think that's when I use utilized that momentum to kind of build a program in which we started looking at a conceptual framework that looked at okay, how do I provide access to the general education curriculum? What are meaningful ways in which students can participate? And what are the support structures that are needed for everyone involved? So we took, I took the position statement that CDC put out in 2009 2010. And I put practices behind each one of those. So for access, we looked at Universal Design for Learning and assistive technology. For participation, we looked at tiered systems of intervention and high leverage practices. And we used to communities of practice model to leverage family and professional collaboration, and bring everyone to the table so that we could problem solve together and build these inclusive practices at school sites.

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Savitha Sundar 10:35
It's wonderful. And you did this when you were a teacher in the elementary.

10:38
That's right. So I started this out in elementary, I started at one school, then another school expressed interest, and then we started working together there, then I decided that it would probably be better for me to be outside of the classroom. And so I, I kind of took on a role as an inclusion specialist, and then started building, working with others, other teachers to build these programs. And so now, in that district, there are four elementary sites, and then two middle school sites and one high school. And in fact, next year, I think the plan is to not have it as a program, which I think is really the way to go. Because practices inclusion has to happen everywhere. It's not a program. It's a philosophy, it's a mindset.

Savitha Sundar 11:25
Okay, I'm going to kind of jump into some philosophical questions. So we hear this statement, "All means all" about inclusion. And when we say this, a lot of special ed teachers and therapists like me, who work in classes that are segregated and where kids spend less than 40% of their time, in Gen Ed settings, even physically, we may kind of shake our heads in disagreement and say, I don't know. I mean, I'm not saying we because I kind of have bought into the idea of "all means all" right here, but I don't have a very convincing way to tell others who questioned this philosophy and say, I don't believe that general education is the least restrictive environment for many students. And they do need to have their own classrooms. What are your thoughts on that?

12:23
Well, to answer this question, I would have to say that we have to examine the status co, which is that students with special needs have to be ready and prepared in order to be included. Students with disabilities are distinctly different from their typically developing peers, and that specialized services and interventions require a separate setting. But let's for one minute flip that mindset if we were to flip those assumptions, and believe that there is an inherent value in educating students with varied learning profiles together, students with disabilities are not distinctly different, but require additional supports, interventions, proactive design elements and accommodations, that the general education is a setting where all of the services and supports can be provided. Basically, what I'm saying is the mantra that is oft repeated. Special Education is a set of services and not a place that has to really be implemented.

Savitha Sundar 13:18
We need to keep hearing that over and over again...

13:22
yes, when you can work as a team and leverage the expertise and insights of each member to figure out how to successfully include students with extensive support needs. In Gen Ed, for example, a PT can address seating and positioning draft a mobility plan. An OT would integrate how we view the sensory experiences of disabled individuals as just that, how do we understand the unique ways in

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which each person regulates themselves and not always aim to extinguish what we consider problem behaviors? Just because they do not conform to a normative sensory ideal, right? I know impairment is real, but disability exists at the intersection of the individual and the environment. Can we re examine the environment in which our students are learning? Because we tend to design environments to the mythical average learner? And if that and we know there is no there is no such thing as an average learner. And if we know that, then why are we designing environments in which students are bound to fail? Can we not design environments where you know who said that a student in kindergarten can only learn the Lord Sit down crisscross applesauce, Snowball hands, eyes on the teacher, right? If we can respect the autistic sensory experience, and not seek to extinguish those problem behaviors, because they are ways in which they regulate I had a student who used to sit on the carpet With his ear to the ground, butt up in the air and make circular motions with his hands, but he was listening to everything that was being taught.

Savitha Sundar 15:09
We would have spent a whole lot of time making him sit.

15:13
Exactly. And for what to what? To what? To what benefit? Why can't we view that as his sensory experience and allow? I don't know, I don't know, if you've ever watched teachers in a staff meeting. They're very, you know, teachers require students to sit. And I say that because I was a teacher, myself,..And, you know, but you have to watch, you have to watch teachers in a staff meeting, you know, there'll be twirling their hair, there used to be one teacher, I used to sit behind who used to push her chair back so far back that I would almost think that she's going to fall off. But she would never fall off because she was really good about regulating, you know, the extent to which she pushed it.

Savitha Sundar 16:16
Yeah, I cannot agree more. Okay, so can you share a story of a moment or time when you felt that all the efforts you're putting into this mission of your life is so worth it, something that brought a smile to your face? I know you kind of shared like the bigger picture of it. But any interesting little story that you can share?

16:36
Oh, yeah, I've had many moments, I think when I've smiled, and one in particular was Juan Carlos, a young autistic elementary student, he had significant challenges in the area of emotional regulation, and used to throw chairs, pencils, but heavy, whatever was on his hands when he was upset. He had also been sent home/ suspended in his period previous school as a six year old, seven to eight times. I remember working with him and talking to him about self regulation. And he told me that when he was mad, no strategy came to his head, because he was so upset. And I was like, yeah, that's, that's true. So, you know, we worked on building his stamina, for regulation by practicing breathing, exercises, mindfulness, and having some tools in front of him that served as reminders on how to use it. And then we also worked with him to recognize how he was feeling way before it got to a point where he had a meltdown. So after like two years of super hard work that he put in, he was able to effectively self regulate, and, you know, as as an IEP speak, right was exited from having a behavior intervention plan.

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And any supports related to that to me, you know, I remember that, at that meeting, he and I were so excited, his mother was crying. Because to me, when we become redundant in a student's IEP, that's when that's, that's really success, you know, he didn't need my constant interference, so to speak. And then I've done my job. Now, there are other students who may need supports and services throughout their school career. And in those cases, if I've worked with teams successfully, and I know I've done this multiple times to create that mindset around inclusion, then to me, that is a success. And I know that I've had another student who, you know, has significant needs and worked with teams, and, you know, one particular school, they just embraced it and ran with it. And that, to me, was just so heartwarming, because, you know, that time that student is truly receiving a free and appropriate public education.

Savitha Sundar 18:50
That's wonderful. That's wonderful. Lakshmi, thank you for sharing these personal experiences, a few of your many personal experiences and stories. And I, I can, I can see that I feel like a lot of features may relate to what you're saying about the examples that you've shared, and the struggles and all this happened while the student was in a general education classroom.

Lakshmi 19:17
That's right. Right. Yeah.

Savitha Sundar 19:19
That is that is so so powerful to hear. And you then put him in a separate classroom to learn these skills. So he can go back to the general education.

19:28
No, I'm, you know, I think that that is a mindset we tend to have that, oh, you know what? You need to be ready and prepared. You need to have like all of these problems need to be taken care of before you can. Do we ask typically developing children to do that in kindergarten classrooms? Do they have to be ready and prepared to enter kindergarten or do we just take anyone who comes through the door? If we think that we are teaching important life skills to all the students in gen ed classrooms? Why disabled kids learn alongside them learn those same skills? Or do we feel that? Gen Ed is not serving that role. And that's why we need all these students who are disabled, to go to these separate classrooms to learn these so called functional skills, so they can enter society after school. What's the point of they can enter society alongside their typical peers? With their first experience?

Savitha Sundar 20:25
Yeah, yeah. And more than anybody else, I think their peers need to have that in depth understanding of the disabilities that many in our society go through. And I'm kind of this is this is one of my biggest areas of interest in my research to how the majority needs to take the step forward to embrace the minority in our community in order for all of us to thrive really well.

20:55
Yeah. And you know, disability is the one minority anyone can, at any point in time become a part of.

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Savitha Sundar 21:02
Yes, totally. And we had, we had Feroze VR in our, one of our earlier episodes, and he just released a book called Invisible majority. They basically saying, the title just says that every individual, if you look at the community of people with disabilities, each person with a disability influences at least four other person in their lives. You end up actually they become the majority. Look,

21:33
I just heard about that book. And I can't wait to start reading it. I just ordered it actually.

Savitha Sundar 21:39
Okay. Yeah, he was in our in our fourth episode.

21:44
Oh, wow. Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Savitha Sundar 21:47
So also, Lakshmi, what would you in your experience, what has been like the biggest barrier in making inclusion a reality in your schools?

22:02
So this is definitely you know, to me a very loaded questions. So I'm going to take a little time and answer it, because I think there's multiple barriers. And I think that mindset can influence whether the Disabled Student merits a spot in general education. I mean, ablest attitudes shape those presumptions that students must act in predetermined ways to merit the level of normalcy. normalcy, right, and ableism is, you know, uncritically asserts that it is better for a child to walk than to roll speak than to sign reprint than read Braille or spell independently, then you spell check. So the construct of disabilities is situated in the system of differentiating normal, and abnormal. And, you know, historically, you've seen that, you know, even, you know, educated or big names in education, like Thorndyke, you know, advocated to sort people into categories so that institutions could determine the types of jobs or occupations best suited for them. And so this practice of sorting still prevails in schools that differentiate individual students by ability, and, you know, put kids or put in classrooms, mild to moderate, moderate, moderate to severe intensive instruction. So, as such across the board labeling practices leads to very intense surveillance. Because, you know, disabled students aren't excessively monitored, you know, for example, if you have a student who has slightly aggressive behaviors, they're monitored, they're categorized, and they're, you know, punished for that. Because they are constantly, you know, you take data on them on their misbehavior, so called. And, you know, that's a, you know, that's a level of hyper vigilant vigilance and surveillance that tends to exist. And, and that, in itself is exclusionary, because because of that students are not allowed to be a part of general education, right? And so it becomes this whole idea of fit, who is to this? Are you too disabled? Are you disabled enough? Or are you fit to be included? Are you an inclusion student, these are the different things that you start to hear. So I think that these are all, you know, really, barriers. There's so much of ableist, as well as disabled this discourse around around students with disabilities and so that, that to me, those are, you know, there are so many others, but I think that in itself, is what restricts access. Yeah.

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Savitha Sundar 24:41
So how do you envision our schools say 20 years from now?

24:47
You know, I would envision it, I have hope. I think that we will hopefully have inclusive schools. We can use technology to our advantage to provide I think that the Technology has really shaped many things. And there are so many, so many points of access that have become so easy now, because of that. And hopefully, we are able to leverage that in a manner that provides access to all our students. Instead of, you know, thinking that students have to fit into something that we have envisioned as normal school, if we can envision that, what we need to do is keep the student front and center and use technology to our advantage to individualize it to the extent that is necessary, and then use all of these principles of universal design for learning to engage students in multiple ways to provide the content in different ways. And to allow students to act and express their knowledge in many ways. I think that is what I see for our future. And hopefully, all our students are included and receive what is due to them so that they can reach their fullest potential.

Savitha Sundar 26:05
Yes, I love it. And it's basically shifting our focus from impairment to access and inclusion, and taking away/deprioritizing fixing disabilities to finding how we can fix the society and make inclusion work. Yes, fix the enviornment. Yes the the physical and the social, environment, to make it work.

Lakshmi 26:32
Right.

Savitha Sundar 26:33
Lakshmi, any anything else you wish I had asked, you?

26:38
No I loved your questions. And it was so nice to chat. And I mean, I think that I this is definitely something I'm very passionate about. And I enjoy talking about so I know I think you asked all of the questions that I would have wanted you to

Savitha Sundar 27:00
thank you Lakshmi, thank you so much. And I only think that we heard a tiny bit of, of all that you have to offer. And I think you can make a huge impact in people people's lives and would it be okay for you to share your contact?

Lakshmi 27:18
Of course, yes. Please do.

Savitha Sundar 27:20
Can I put it on the show notes if people want to reach out to you?

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Lakshmi 27:23
They absolutely should and can. I love that. Thank you so much for the opportunity. Savitha.

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