Occasional Teachers

[00:00:00] **Delphine:** Welcome back to the access to education podcast, where we talk about all things having to do with learning disabilities and learning challenges.

School can be an emotional place for families, with children who have learning challenges or are neurodiverse. Their needs can vary. And as parents, when we drop our children off at the door, we hope that whoever is caring for our child, that day is able to support and care for them in the way they need.

So what happens when your child has an occasional teacher for either just one day or as a long-term replacement for the regular. How do you support your child in advocating for themselves? And how do you as the parent advocate with that teacher and how best do you create a relationship with a new teacher?

One who may not be there for very long today on the show. I'm happy to introduce you to Amanda Yule. She is an occasional teacher in the Toronto area and has spent her career supporting new teachers in learning how to be the best OT they can be. She is the author of many books. Is very engaged in [00:01:00] the teaching profession, providing professional learning to occasional teachers.

Amanda, welcome to the show.

[00:01:06] **Amanda:** Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

[00:01:08] **Delphine:** So this is a bit of a different take tonight. I'm usually talking to parents or I'm talking to medical experts, but we're looking at neuro diversity and learning needs from, I think a side of things. Can seem, I don't even know what the word is that I'm looking for, but very foreign.

And just sometimes the idea that that occasional teacher is just there for the day and then they're leaving.

[00:01:31] **Amanda:** Yes. And with all of the many, like emotions that brings up in students and parents sometimes.

[00:01:38] **Delphine:** Yeah, for sure. So what's the difference between, and I'm using air quotes, the regular teacher and an occasional, or what other parents might hear as a supply teacher?

What is really the difference between those two?

[00:01:53] **Amanda:** Yeah. So really it's a matter of relationship with the students. So the, the classroom teacher has an established relationship with the students. They have a long time, to build that relationship, grow the relationship when the occasional, our supply teacher comes and they have.

About 10 minutes to build a relationship because that's when you really get or lose the students as the first 10 minutes. And so a really good supply teacher will be really good at building relationships quickly with the students. And a lot, a lot of an occasion teacher's job is then a classroom management type thing.

Whereas a classroom teacher, that's only really part of their job. They have many other parts to their job.

[00:02:37] **Delphine:** So if we think about that initial 10 minutes and I'm thinking, I know I'm. Tell me if I'm thinking of the wrong 10 minutes of the day, but I'm thinking of the go to the line, wherever the pickup is in the yard.

And you're like, okay, where is so, and so's classes line and the kids are, oh, it's a supply teacher. And they're all excited because it's someone different. Right? They do get kind of excited.

[00:02:57] **Amanda:** Yes. Yes, they do.

[00:03:00] **Delphine:** You're coming into the building if you're not already and you're walking to the class. And so that's kind of, you know, first three or four minutes, and then you're coming into the classroom and everybody's hanging up their coats.

And it's been a long time since I've been an occasional teacher, but I do remember that moment of like, okay, everybody's hung up their coats now, where does anybody sit and how am I best going to. Move forward with my day. So is that sort of the first 10 minutes of relationship building you're talking about?

[00:03:25] **Amanda:** Yes. And so I think especially important is the part where you just got to, they've hung up their coats and now it can go into chaos or it can go into a good class for the day. So the right at that point is sort of the occasional teachers need to sort of, this is what we're doing and. Like make sure the students are like sometimes a little bit anxious.

Right. And so make sure they know this is going to be a good day. I'm not going to yell at you all day, which is what they're worried about, you know, and what the parents have heard. They yelled all day, right? [00:04:00] Yeah. So those are the 10 minutes in there. And especially that point. Right, right. After they have their coats really important right there.

[00:04:06] **Delphine:** So how can OTs get to know a classroom. Quickly and efficiently so that they can sort of assess right from afar and they're not going to listen. They're not going deep into this assessment. When I use assessment, I use it in terms of like, observe it's probably observe is probably the better word than to use this as a son than to use the word assess, but how can they sort of take a look quickly at the class that is around them and say, okay, these are the kids I have.

And here are the children that I'm already envisioning. Might need a bit of extra care or might need a bit of extra attention. And I don't, and I want to be really clear on this. I don't mean for the kids who are behavioural. I really don't because that's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is the student who, I think as teachers.

a napped at being able to see who are the kids who maybe need a little more help. So how can occasional teachers best identify those kids who maybe have learning struggles that maybe you don't know about? Like what, what would that look like walking into a classroom?

[00:05:12] **Amanda:** One of the really important things that occasional teachers do is the preparation. And so the absolute best way to do that is to read the notes that the homeroom teacher left. So hopefully the homeroom teacher has left a note that it includes what students are going to need extra help with math. What students are going to need a little bit of extra time to get ready for recess or in transitions or what the students are going to need some calm down activities.

And. Often when occasional teachers come into the office, they might ask the office secretary or the teacher next door, like really the preparation is a really, really important part. Um, but there are some days where somebody has been called away on an emergency and you come in and you know, or there's a traffic jam and you're in the classroom and there's the students.

I have to say, the students are a really good source of information. There'll be like, oh yeah, the teacher always helps. Group over here or, oh yeah. They always need to go to the bathroom five times. That is normal for them. Like, you know, like that is, they're a great source of information. And like you said, the rest is really observation.

Like you can see that the student has their pencil out and they've now been reading the same question for five minutes and they're not fooling around, but they are rereading and rereading. Right. And then you're just observing. And then I think a good way to do it as questions. If anyone would like help.

You know, you can let me know, or as you like be around

[00:06:38] **Delphine:** And I think offering that help too. Right? Like that's important. So the kids know that they actually can come to you as the teacher, if they need something that you're not just a, you're not just a body to stand in the room to make sure that nobody gets hurt.

You're actually there, your job is to continue the learning and to continue to support that's right. So there's something that you have just said that triggered me a little bit. And you talked about teacher notes. Yes. So let's talk about that for a quick second, because I'm not sure it was in my thought to talk about, but it actually maybe makes a little bit of sense to talk about.

So when we talk or when we think about all, listen, all of our classrooms now have children of different learning abilities, have different learning needs, have different things. And I'm thinking back to my in-class days where I had 20 to 22 kids. And quite frankly, I was not going to leave you a laundry list of the 22 children and all of the different things.

Right. I suppose you could have, but that seems really time-consuming. So what is the information that classroom teachers can best sort of leave on their desk for you that gives you. Okay. I need to pay attention to Lisa because the teacher has said this and Jimmy needs to have this. Like, what are the pieces that are really important [00:08:00] to make our kids who have challenges in school already, even more comfortable with the day when there is that uncertainty of the body in the room? Does that sentence question? Makes sense?

[00:08:11] **Amanda:** Yeah. Yes, yes. Yeah. That does make sense. So. Usually teachers will leave, notes about students, who they feel would benefit from the occasional teacher, knowing that they need extra help. So besides, you know, the students have a safety plan, but the students who like there's often notes left about students who are anxious, the student can be anxious if this happens, or students have a hard time controlling, their anxiety.

Like, so I think when. You can foresee that the occasional teacher may need a heads up, uh, has, uh, the student really does need help with math or heads up. This student really does need help with de-escalation techniques. You know those are, and often there'll be two or three students in a class that the teacher, the classroom teacher will let the occasional teacher know about it.

That's kind of average, I'd say.

[00:09:03] **Delphine:** And then I'm just thinking of at the end of the day, when that OT. Is done for the day and let's assume it's, it's, uh, I'm going to say grade K to three because those are the eye to eye I dismiss the kids, right? Those are the ones where the occasional teacher might potentially meet a parent or a guardian or whoever is picking up that child that day, an adult in that child's life. Is there a benefit to an occasional teacher attempting to reach out to the family? If the day went really well?

Or if the day didn't go so well, is there a benefit to trying to do that, or is it better for the occasional teacher to just kind of leave a note for the teacher to then do a follow-up? Is there a plus or minus?

[00:09:45] **Amanda:** I would say that if the , day went really well and you happen to see the parent, for sure.

Mention it, that's always really welcome. I think the only time I would talk with a parent as an occasional teacher about a day that didn't go well, is if they were still having trouble, like. If we had had a difficult time and they were still having trouble at dismissal, I might just let the parent know it's been a difficult day so that they have a heads up because they would appreciate that knowing that it's been a hard day and otherwise, if they're not having difficulty, when it's time to go, I would just leave a note for the teacher because the teacher may or may not pass that on.

We don't know everything as occasional teachers.

[00:10:29] **Delphine:** So. Every teacher comes with their own background, knowledge on topics and ways of dealing with things. And we know that all classes have, as I said earlier, sort of different levels, different abilities, all of those things, but how, or what recommendations do you have for an OT to support a student?

For example, maybe there's a student who's on the spectrum or someone who's struggling with behaviour. What's the best way, for that occasional teacher to support the students.

[00:11:00] **Amanda:** Yeah, I think I sort of have my top three things to do there because it's good to have a variety of strategies. And so the first one is to find out what the teacher does and follow it as closely as possible.

The closer we can stay to the classes, regular routine, the better students on the spectrum and students with anxiety are going to be, and even kindergarten students like, you know. If you do a kindergarten class and you take attendance before O'Canada, when the regular teacher takes attendance after O'Canada, they'll think you're a bad teacher. You don't even know how to do attendance. Come on. So, but I do think stay as close as possible to the routine they know.

And second, you can ask the students, what do you need? What would you like? And now not all students are able to answer that, but quite a few are.

And then the third thing is some of the students. They're just going to be uncomfortable because it's not their regular teacher. And in that case, distraction, distraction is the best thing, [00:12:00] a fun game. Sitting with a friend to do their work, helping you sharpen the pencils or punch holes and papers. Distraction is definitely the way to go.

[00:12:10] **Delphine:** So Let's kind of shift gears a little bit, and I want to make the distinction between an occasional teacher and what we in the industry, as it were call a long-term occasional teacher. So can you tell us a little bit about the difference between what would be an occasional teacher, a supply teacher versus a long-term occasional.

[00:12:28] **Amanda:** Sure. So the occasional teachers just coming for the day, or maybe a couple of days up to two weeks, it's just, we sort of say a daily occasional teacher.

But once they're there for longer than two weeks, they become a long-term occasional teacher. So they're going to start, doing marking and planning and being more involved in the school.

[00:12:47] **Delphine:** So. Let's say there's a family who has had a teacher for September and it's now January. And for whatever reason, the regular classroom teacher is going on a leave or going elsewhere for whatever reason needs to not be at school for a period of longer than to your point of the two weeks.

And we know that someone new is coming in. And I know I've had this happen where with my own neuro-diverse kids, I've built a really solid foundation of teamwork with this classroom teacher. And it really does feel a little bit like the, you know, the floor has been pulled out from under me because here I am starting all over again.

So what advice do you have for families who are facing an LTO, for their child and how can they start to sort of. Put in place or build that relationship because really you're starting all over again, except that you're part way through the year, instead of in September, which is a natural break time.

So have you got any suggestions for how families can, kind of work with the OT or the LTO to kind of rebuild a relationship?

[00:13:50] **Amanda:** Yes. So when they find out that there's going to be an LTO, I would say for sure, you can reach out to, uh, the principal or vice-principal and ask if you can send an email to the teacher coming in before they come in. Cause that will really help, like the first day, makes the difference. So, you know, it's for sure. I think a great idea to try. Um, before the first day, if possible, just with some ideas that really work for your child, this is what the teacher did that worked really well. You know, obviously, you're a new teacher.

We just wanted to let you know that this does work well. And I have to say like 99% of occasional teachers going to be great. I'm going to do that. Like they're all, all over getting. You know, and knowing what to do. The other thing is I remember, I was doing an LTO and the classroom teacher was coming back from maternity leave and we knew for a while she was coming back.

And so, the parents and I, and her spoke and she took pictures of herself. And sent them to school and then we would show those pictures every day. We had two students on the spectrum that year, and we would show those pictures every day so that when [00:15:00] she came, it felt like they already knew her. So there are some things that we can do to sort of help, help things like the transition.

Go a bit better, talk about it, get ready. You know, and it is like, it is starting over. Like you do. It is starting from the beginning and getting to know the person and them getting to know you and the styles.

[00:15:23] **Delphine:** And, and I think too, I mean, as a parent of at least one kiddo who struggles quite a bit with transition and change, I think where possible.

And listen, this can't happen all the time, but where it's possible to anticipate the change and have the conversation with the child and say, okay, you know, Ms. Smith has to go on a leave, but Mr. Dunkin is coming in and you know, he's going to have spoken to Ms. Smith and we're going to be here and we're going to have conversation like.

Really just opening the door for the child to ask questions because they're probably anxious, just as anxious as the OT committee. I know the OTs for them. It's like the first day of school when they come in like that. Right. So it is a little bit overwhelming and a bit frightening. And they're taking on a class and a community that is already established, which is, which is hard, right?

It's it's not very easy.

[00:16:17] **Amanda:** Yeah. With routines and procedures and even where the desk is, somebody else has chosen for you where your teacher desks is going to be. So, yeah, it's it's for everyone. A bit of an adjustment.

[00:16:29] **Delphine:** Yeah, for sure. So this is a question really, just for my own learning as an administrator in a building. Cause I have you in front of me and I can ask the question. Maybe there are other administrators listening to this conversation. I don't really know, but here we are. I hope there are some listings, but what can administrators do to support the occasional teacher as they come into a new class? What can they do as administrators to support the family of the student who may have exceptionalities?

What is it that we as administrators can do that might kind of make it everybody's transition teacher, student, parents a little bit easier.

[00:17:05] **Amanda:** So I think one of the main things that I've seen done that really helps is for the first two or three days, , they assign maybe one of the educational assistants or, one of the, staff in the school to be in the classroom more often than they would normally.

So sometimes there's. You know, support teachers or EAs and yeah, when they're available for more of the day to help with students who have, um, maybe specific learning needs that does really help a lot. And the other thing that I think really helps from a, an OTs point of view with the administration is when they offer, training or professional learning.

They're going to need in that classroom that they may not have. So asking the OT, what, you know, are you comfortable with this? If not, can I get you training for a day? can I give you a book like that does really, really help? And even just the facilitation of, like I said before, Even if there's time meeting the child the day before, or, you know, even just talking about the day before, like the preparation, that really is a big, big key for occasional teachers coming into a new, situation.

[00:18:20] **Delphine:** I think I have like a vague recollection. I managed to work by maternity leaves in terms of I would come back in September, like when I came back. So that, that part was easy. But I feel like when I left. In one particular year with one of the kids. I think we brought in the OT for my admin, agreed to let the OT come in for a day or two before I left so that there was a bit of overlap.

Right. So that, and I actually, I think I remember that being quite beneficial for me because at least I knew that I was leaving my class with someone I had met and we had kind of talked through things. But also just sort of for the kids and the parents to kind of get a sea of who that person was, your question or your comment rather around.

Training and teacher training. Okay, listen, occasional teachers, new teachers cannot be expected to know all the training that is required when you get into the job. And let's be quite frank about this. Most of the training you're going to get, and I'm saying this to all new teachers who are listening to this currently, you literally it's on-the-job training.

Yes. I mean, that is like, You, you cannot beat the, on-the-job training. You can do all the book reading. You can do all the webcasts you want. You can do all of the YouTube watching that you can handle, but nothing, absolutely nothing prepares you for being in a classroom with 30 faces, staring at you all with very different ideas of how their day is going to go.

Let's just put that out on the table.

That said are their particular types of training or information learning that you think is really beneficial to supply teachers to come in and support various learning needs? Is there something. I don't, I don't know. Is there one type of training that they really should focus on or is it just kind of get your feet wet and see what comes out?

[00:20:06] **Amanda:** Well, definitely like mentorship programs are a huge plus, right? Like, so especially for new teachers, obviously occasional teachers can be retired teachers and they're not going to need a mentor program, but for the new teachers, a mentorship program, or even just like a teaching partner that you can ask questions to is so, so helpful.

And I think there's a couple of topics that are more helpful than, than others, like for sure, for sure. Teachers don't all have a special education training, but sort of an overview of special education strategies is really helpful. And I would also say de-escalation strategies, that's huge and not often taught and they can just make a world of difference.

So I do think those things are sort of more useful [00:21:00] than perhaps others along with classroom management strategies.

[00:21:04] **Delphine:** Yeah. And those for any new OTs, and this is not for retired OTs, this is definitely for new OTs, your ability to anticipate, move, pivot, and. Stop things in their track. I promise the more classes you get into the, the more schools you get out to, the more different things you see, the quicker you will be able to pick up on those things.

So Amanda, what book recommendations do you have for teachers? And I know you have a couple, so let's hear about your books, but also, are there any other books that OTs should read in terms of how to support students in a classroom, in an effective.

[00:21:41] **Amanda:** So my first book is called a substitute teaching, uh, very, very easy.

and the second one is reaching and teaching them all. And it's about just what we've been talking about. How do you teach everyone with all their different backgrounds and learning abilities and all that? And the last one is what's the difference specifically for teaching students on the autism spectrum?

However I have to say, I really. Love because I've been focusing on the autism spectrum recently. I really, really love, Paula clues. She has a book called You're Going to Love this Kid. Oh, it's so amazing because she takes, I think she was maybe the first person I ever read, who talked about the strengths of students on the autism spectrum.

And she has a second book called, Just Give Them the Whale. A teacher was asking her what, like, what should I do? He won't do anything without the whale. And she's like, well, then give him the whale. Like that's okay. That's okay. So, I think if you're going into a class with somebody on the spectrum, like for sure read those books, they're they're so, so great.

[00:22:44] **Delphine:** Easy reads. Her books are very easy to read. They're not. They're not really scientific, like in terms of the, they're not the boring science books about the brain and how it's just very practical useful information.

[00:22:55] **Amanda:** And I would say again for autism, I love, I love Born on a Blue Day.

It's just, I'm an autobiography of a guy. Danielle Tim. And, it really helps people understand he's really good at explaining how he thinks. And I think if you want to get into the mind of an autistic person, his explanations are excellent and it's so fun, like so interesting and so fun to read. So, yeah, so not really only OTs, but for people who are going to have somebody on the autism spectrum, those are books I would highly recommend,

[00:23:27] **Delphine:** But I think that that just helps understand. You know what the strengths are of our students on the spectrum, because there are many, but it also can highlight. I think some of the challenges that they face and what we, as the support people in their lives can do to make their life a little easier that day and not make it such a struggle. Right.

Because it doesn't mean.

[00:23:50] **Amanda:** No, no, not, not as much as it can be. Yes.

[00:23:54] **Delphine:** So what about websites? We all know. We like to go to Mr. Google or whatever to the Google. It is now, right? It's actually a word in the dictionary. Isn't it? Google something?

[00:24:03] **Amanda:** Yes, it is. It is. It is.

[00:24:04] **Delphine:** So what websites have you got? The teachers could explore. That would be helpful.

[00:24:08] **Amanda:** So again, because I've been, researching and doing what the last book was on the autism spectrum. I love love, there's a website called wrongplanet.net. And it's by autistic people for autistic people with tons of forums. And again, like when parents are looking for, answers or when autistic kids are looking for answers themselves.

There's so many good answers on that website. So I would say for the Autism Spectrum, wrongplanet.net. And then for new teachers, I would say the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario has whole like pages for occasional teachers that are actually really well done, like really, really well done.

And they have a book called I Am the Teacher for Occasional Teachers, you know? Oh, you're not really a teacher. No, no, I am the teacher. And it's also a really well-researched field tested book. And so I recommend like the union has great material, really helpful material. That's what I would recommend.

[00:25:07] **Delphine:** Yeah. And they are super supportive of that kind of stuff. Right. And, and. Information out that is, digestible. They don't over-give right. They give you just enough that you can go in and think about it and really be able to, kind of pull out what you need. Um, free workshops. Do they do a free workshops?

So people often don't know about, so go check those out. Amanda, where can people learn more about.

[00:25:31] **Amanda:** So my website is amandayuill.com and on social media, you can also find me under amandayuill. I'm on all the social media, except for tick-tock. I'm too old. I can't do that. You're

not too old. I promise you're not even I can do it.

[00:25:46] **Delphine:** You're not too old.

[00:25:49] **Amanda:** That's my brother's been trying to get me into it, .

[00:25:51] **Delphine:** Well, Amanda, thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing your extensive knowledge on, I will call it supply teaching. Cause that's what I've always called it.

But [00:26:00] thank you for coming to share your expertise and knowledge on, what it is to be a supply teacher and how parents can communicate with that supply teacher to ensure the success of their child. Thank you so much.

[00:26:10] **Amanda:** Oh, no, thank you. I really, I was so, so happy to be here.