

profile:

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It's interesting to be asked to reflect on my work in the field of intellectual disability when professionally things have changed dramatically for me with my appointment at Deakin University almost three years ago moving into higher education teaching after a number of years working as a researcher. Luckily for me, the teaching job still allows me to engage with my research in sexuality, abuse prevention, political participation, advocacy and inclusive research approaches, however the balance has shifted.

Being in a teaching role, coordinating new post graduate programs in disability and inclusion has enabled me to bring current research in the broader field of disability into our program.

Our two courses – Graduate Certificate of Disability and Inclusion and a Masters of Disability and Inclusion engage students in developing contemporary understandings of disability and how to apply these in a policy and practice context strongly focussed on rights, equality and inclusion in society.

This takes me back to what led me to work in this area. I started off studying Social Work but that only lasted one year, I followed this with a primary teaching course but this was not for me. While studying this course I completed a major in Special Education – it was actually called Exceptionality interestingly enough. After graduating from teaching and a fairly un-startling year teaching I quickly found my way back to University and did post graduate studies in Special Education.

During my study I worked at Kew Cottages as an emergency teacher. At that time the institution

had a school program for all residents with different 'levels' depending on the severity of disability. It was here that I gained an incredible insight into how the institutional environment completely determined what was possible for people. I can't begin to talk about what I saw here; as a young woman moving into my own life of adulthood I was appalled and as an up and coming advocate I was motivated.

After this I began working with adults with an intellectual disability transitioning from school to a newly developed adult service. In this bespoke service I spent time with young people who, like many young people were trying to 'become adults', socially and personally trying to carve out their place in the world in their own right. Again my eyes were opened to the barriers they faced in doing this and as the assigned 'educational instructor' I was given a blank page to work with them towards their goals.

This is where my interest in sexuality in the lives of people with an intellectual disability began. It had clearly been overlooked in these young adults' lives – quite the opposite was the case for every other young adult I knew at the time.

Fast forward over the years since then. I have kept many of those people in my mind as I have pursued my career as an educator, researcher, project worker and policy advocate. What I learned then was the importance of seeing each person as a person first

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and starting from there. I also learned the importance of the politics of disability and how to work from the personal to the political to create change.

There has been a huge shift in the way we understand disability over the time I have worked in this area but I am continually surprised that the remnants of a model that 'others' people with an intellectual disability are still present in some of what I see in research and practice.

While in Australia we have had rights based legislation and approaches for nearly three decades I think the UNCRPD is perhaps the best opportunity we have had to push the bar higher and work alongside our friends and colleagues with an intellectual disability to put personhood at the centre of everything we

do and to make sure our communities and broader society see people with an intellectual disability as their equals who belong.

Of course I'd really like people with an intellectual disability to have an equal voice alongside their peers in the disability sector to shape the policy context, I'd like people to be self-determining about and able to have intimate relationships and be safe and respected in other relationships.

I think these things are perhaps some areas ASID could think about in its support of research in intellectual disability in collaboration with people with an intellectual disability. ●

