Experiences and insights from students living with disability in NSW public schools and their parents/carers

Summary report

Purple Orange

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Introduction

The NSW Department for Education's (the Department) Disability Strategy was released on 21 February 2019. The strategy was informed by the Legislative Council's Inquiry into the education of students living with disability or special needs in NSW and the release of the Committee's report in September 2017, as well as extensive consultation and collaboration with families, educators, community groups and disability advocates and experts. The Disability Strategy provides a reform plan to provide children and young people with disability, their families and the broader community with an education system that meets their needs.

The Disability Strategy defines inclusive education in NSW as:

> "all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices."

Following the release of the Disability Strategy, the Department released an 'Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability' to further its commitment to improving learning and wellbeing for students with disability. The Inclusive Education Statement outlines six Principles of Inclusive Practice for Students with Disability:

1. Student agency and self-determination
2. Parent and carer inclusion
3. Social and cultural inclusion
4. Curriculum inclusion
5. Workforce capability for inclusion
6. System inclusion

The Department commissioned JFA Purple Orange to deliver a series of focus groups and interviews with students living with disability and their parents/carers. The purpose of the research was to explore opportunities to strengthen inclusive practice in NSW public schools and identify specific opportunities for the Department to strengthen inclusion and inclusive practice in NSW public schools.

JFA Purple Orange ran 14 focus groups and 17 interviews with 75 participants via an online platform throughout September and October 2020. These consultations uncovered a range of ideas and views around inclusive practices in NSW public schools.

A significant amount of qualitative data was gathered through the focus groups and interviews and a summary of these findings are provided in this report. The research captures the commitment and good practices

currently happening in NSW public schools as well as highlighting gaps and areas that could be improved/strengthened.

While the issues and ideas presented in this summary report bring a valuable perspective, it is important to recognise that they are not necessarily representative of all students living with disability and their parents/carers. The purpose of this research was to provide an in-depth exploration of experiences, and therefore the sample size was small and not representative of the population.

Using co-design

A co-design group was established at the beginning of the project to guide the consultation process. Given the variety of engagements required for this project, it was important that each of the cohorts targeted in the research had representation on this group. Therefore, the group consisted of a school Principal, a parent, two young people living with disability, an academic with expertise in inclusive education research and a Departmental representative.

The co-design group provided valuable input on the development of the research approach and the focus group/interview questions. The feedback from the co-design group centered around ensuring that the project was designed in a way that enables people living with disability and their parents/carers to provide meaningful input.

Who was consulted and how?

In total, there were 75 participants involved in this research:

▸ 41 students aged 7-17 years, currently attending a NSW public school.

▸ 6 past students of a NSW public school, aged 19-25 years.

▸ 28 parents/carers with a child attending (or who previously attended) a NSW public school.

Of these participants;

▸ 64 individuals participated in an online focus group.

▸ 17 individuals participated in an online interview.

(note that some participants did both)

School recruitment was through an expression of interest process run by the Department with 24 schools initially approached via random selection by the Department's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). Eight schools responded to the expression of interest and provided participants for the current student cohort. This included primary schools, high schools, schools with and without support classes, and schools for specific purposes (SSP). The schools were also across locations and included those from a rural/remote, regional and metro areas. Past students and parents/carers were recruited via these eight schools, the Department's Disability Strategy Team public mailbox, and NSW advocacy organisations.

The research captures the commitment and good practices currently happening in NSW public schools as well as highlighting gaps and areas that could be improved/strengthened.

What's working well?

Most current students felt encouraged, motivated and supported by their teachers.

Several past students described positive experiences of engaging and learning alongside their peers.

Reports of authentic connection with students and teachers where the teacher has made the effort to get to know each student and the student feels seen, heard, and understood.

Instances of students participating in negotiations and decisions about curriculum adjustments and supports.

Examples of successful adjustments and supports including extensions on assignments, additional time in tests, and enlarged print or another different format for assignments and tests.

Situations where parents/carers and teachers worked together in partnership to achieve positive outcomes for the student.

The application of useful communication methods such as ClassDojo.

Positive experiences of students interacting with peers and building friendships.

Examples of schools creating welcoming and inclusive environments. Often this was as a result of a Principal with a strong commitment to inclusion.

Examples of students having good relationships with School Learning Support Officers (SLSO) and positive experiences of SLSOs supporting their participation and learning in class.

What could be improved?

Students being given learning and assessment tasks that are not appropriately matched to their abilities and strengths.

Limited opportunities for students to exercise choice, voice and control at school and to provide feedback about their classroom and whole-school policies and practices.

Effectiveness of existing formal school leadership programs such as Student Representative Council (SRC) and student captains and their lack of focus on disability and inclusion.

Parents/carers having difficulties in communicating with their child's teachers and feeling like their child's school did not view or treat them as an expert on their child.

Limited knowledge and capacity in schools around curriculum adjustments.

Concerns around inadequate support for teachers, increasing workloads and limited time for planning, impacting teachers' capacity to appropriately support students living with disability.

Lack of awareness in schools around disability, diversity, and inclusive practices and the need for education and training.

Deficits approach in schools and the lack of opportunities to provide information and insights about student's strengths.

Varying approaches to post-school guidance and planning and inconsistencies with transition supports provided to students living with disability and families.

Concerns identified by parents/carers include inadequate support for teachers, increasing workloads and limited planning time impacting teachers' capacity to appropriately support students living with disability.

Summary of findings

The format and questions for interviews/focus groups were different for each cohort and were designed to elicit their perspectives into what's working well and what could be improved. The following is a summary of the experiences and insights shared by current students, past students, and parents/carers consulted for this qualitative research project.

Aspirations

> "And some teachers… they underestimate us. They don't think we understand what they're saying sometimes. Well, some of us do."

Current student

All three cohorts emphasised the importance of schools having high aspirations and expectations of students. Most of the current students reported being encouraged, motivated and supported by their teachers, although some variation between teachers and their practices were noted. While some past students provided examples of teachers having high or at least fair expectations of them, other past students and most parents/carers felt that teachers did not have high aspirations and expectations for students living with disability.

Parents/carers provided examples of when their child was given learning and assessment tasks that were not appropriately matched to their abilities and strengths. Some parents/carers suggested one of the contributors to low expectations of students living with disability is the deficits approach that is common in schools. Parents/carers highlighted the lack of opportunities to provide information and insights about their child's strengths to their child's teachers.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▸ Teachers and other school staff must have high expectations and aspirations for all students, including students living with disability.

▸ Support strength-based approaches by creating opportunities for students and families to provide information and insights about student's strengths to their teachers.

> "I had some great teachers who treated me like any other student and had exactly the same expectations for me as everyone else, if not, higher because I was put in lower classes than I should've been. Some teachers, I think, took it easy on me for whatever reason. But, all of my favorite teachers pushed me."

Past student

Current and past students emphasised the importance of student leadership in their classrooms and in their broader school community and welcomed further opportunities for students living with disability to be involved.

Student voice and leadership

"…sometimes it takes us a lot of, well, speaking up to finally get them to listen to us."

Current student

While some past students shared positive experiences of participating in negotiations and decisions about curriculum adjustments and supports, current and past students generally reported limited opportunities to exercise choice, voice and control at school.

Current and past students emphasised the importance of student leadership in their classrooms and in their broader school community and welcomed further opportunities for students living with disability to be involved. Students in both cohorts criticised existing formal school leadership programs such as SRC and student captains and suggested these initiatives need stronger focus on disability and inclusion.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▸ Listen to students living with disability and give them choice, voice, and control in their learning and schooling life.

▸ Create opportunities for students to have a genuine voice and assume leadership roles. Teachers can give students choice and responsibility around learning and assessment activities.

"Young people themselves have a lot of solutions... We should be asking them about re-designing their own learning to make it more inclusive."

Parent

Working in partnership with parents/carers

"I think it comes down to a good relationship with the school. It comes down to the parent knowing their child really well and the parent being acknowledged by the school as the person who knows the child the best and that fine line between the parent acknowledging the educator's expertise as an educator but the educator looking to the parent for insight as to what works best for their child and if you can actually get that balance working well, then the adjustments are done appropriately and the child can learn really well."

Parent

Working in partnership and communication were key areas explored in the parent/carer focus groups. Situations where parents/carers and teachers worked together in partnership was one of the key success factors indicated by parents/carers. While these positive relationships did exist in some circumstances, parents/carers felt that they had to work hard to establish and maintain these relationships with their child's teachers and school leaders.

Parents/carers identified positive communication methods such as ClassDojo, however the use of this app seemed to be limited to SSPs and support classes. Some parents/carers discussed difficulties communicating with their child's teachers and reported feeling like their child's school did not view or treat them as an expert on their child. Some parents/carers reported feeling that their child's schools had shut them out.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▶ Parents/carers are the experts on their child and successful schools use parents/carers knowledge and ideas to ensure their child is well supported.

▶ Create deliberate opportunities for parents/carers and teachers to collaborate and work in partnership.

▶ Utilise regular communication tools such as ClassDojo in all school settings.

▶ Develop resources and guidance for parents/carers to support them to understand various system-wide and school-based policies and processes.

Belonging and school culture

"Just make sure everyone feels welcome and it's a good experience. Just because you're there doesn't mean you're included."

Past student

Social and cultural inclusion was explored at length in all focus groups and interviews with a diverse range of stories and insights shared. Some students shared positive experiences of interacting with peers and building friendships, whereas other examples of social exclusion, othering, and lacking a sense of belonging were shared. Current and past students identified difficulties interacting with peers who do not have disability and the need for schools to take a more proactive approach around intervening when students are struggling to connect with peers or are socially isolated.

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of students living with disability being included in all school activities. Parents/carers identified withdrawal from class, suspensions, and exclusions from school events/activities such as excursions and sports days as key barriers to full and genuine school inclusion.

Parents/carers reported that school culture is driven by the Principal and shared examples illustrating how the attitudes and values of the Principal have influenced whether their child is included and supported.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▸ A whole-school approach creates a shared value system and commitment to inclusive culture.

▸ Strong, consistent leadership around school inclusion is needed. Educate school leaders on disability and inclusion to support shifts towards more welcoming and inclusive cultures.

▸ Implement programs to support social skills development to address barriers to social and cultural inclusion for students living with disability.

▸ Consider creating a dedicated role in schools to look at the social and emotional health of the whole school environment and implementing strategies to support change.

"I don't think belonging can really happen unless the child is completely included in the class and in all the activities."

Parent

Disability awareness and inclusion

"They should educate school students on how to interact with people with disabilities whether it's basic sign language skills even, and that they should tell them that not everyone in a wheelchair has an intellectual disability."

Past student

All three cohorts highlighted the need for attitudinal change towards disability among students, families, and school staff. Parents/carers shared positive stories of schools that have successfully taught students without disability to be inclusive.

Some participants expressed frustration about the lack of understanding in their school community about disability and inclusion and suggested that education is needed for the whole school community including students, parents/families, teachers, and other school staff. Students suggested that disability awareness and inclusion education should cover different communication needs and preferences of people living with disability and addressing myths and stereotypes about specific disabilities such as intellectual disability. Past students recommended that this disability awareness-raising and capacity-building training should be delivered by people living with disability, perhaps past students.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▶ All school community members (school staff, students, and families) require education on disability, diversity, and inclusive practices.

▶ Engage past students to share their schooling experiences as a way of educating school communities.

▶ Consider the creation of information sheets for students about different disabilities and ways of communicating with a person who has that disability (e.g. sign language for greetings and introductions).

"Students need to be trained properly, with how to deal with someone with a disability. But, not treat them like a person with a disability. Treat them like a normal person."

Past student

Curriculum inclusion

"When they actually understood what his passion was and… the curriculum was then based around that passion, that engaged him. So engaging him meant they had to understand him, they had to get to know him a little bit, and then work towards those passions, so that's when it worked."

Parent

Past students shared a range of experiences around curriculum access including working with their school to plan and negotiate adjustments. Current and past students who had SLSOs in-class described more successful experiences of participating in class and having the support they needed.

Current students emphasised the need for all teachers to give instructions and help in clear and easy-to-understand ways. They also emphasised the importance of making learning engaging and fun and incorporating creativity and art.

Parents/carers identified limited knowledge and capacity in schools around curriculum adjustments and confusion over the levels of adjustment and how to effectively design and implement adjustments. Some parents/carers believe that their child's school lacks the professional expertise to adjust teaching and learning to suit their child's ability and needs. Some parents/carers expressed concern that there is no standard around what an Individual Education Plan (IEP) should look like, so parents/carers are unable to check whether their child's IEP is high quality.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▸ Ensure schools work in partnership with students and families to plan and implement adjustments, according to a clear and transparent planning process. Students and families should be given choice and have input into educational decisions.

▸ Teachers and other school staff need to have the time and resources to engage, support, and educate students living with disability. This includes increasing teachers' capacity and confidence to design and implement curriculum adjustments.

▸ Provide information and support to parents/carers around IEPs and other planning resources.

▸ Learning needs to be engaging, interactive, and fun for all students. Group work, project-based learning, art, games and rewards are strategies identified by students as effective.

"My school was great in that they did absolutely everything and anything they could to help me learn, participate, and do well in my studies. Anything I needed, whether that was electronic copies of work, extra time, making sure I had all the provisions I needed to do my exams, asking me questions ahead of time so I had time to prepare my answers to participate in classroom discussions, anything really. Nothing was too difficult, especially in the later years of high school."

Past student

What students appreciate in teachers

"She's calm, and she's nice… she speaks calmly."
"He was understanding."

Current students

Focus groups and interviews with current and past students started with a discussion around their favourite teacher and the qualities and skills of great teachers. Students focused on the personal qualities and characteristics of their teachers rather than the subject they taught or their teaching style and quality. Current students repeatedly noted the following personal qualities of their favourite teachers:

▶   nice and friendly,

▶   supportive and compassionate,

▶   interesting and smart, and

▶   fun and good energy.

A key theme was the importance of an authentic connection between students and teachers where the teacher has made the effort to get to know each student and the student feels seen, heard, and understood.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▶   Relationships between students and teachers are central to inclusive school communities.

▶   Caring is an essential quality of good teachers who form authentic connections with their students and support them to thrive.

"I actually wanted to learn, since that day we got along like a house on fire. She was a lovely teacher, I actually learned things with her, she was so easy to get along with, we were great friends. She really cared, it was lovely."

Past student

Transitions

"Ask the questions, take genuine interest in the student's response, have ideas about what could be possible, what is available and what the student could do in the future."

Past student

Discussions with current and past students about school transition practices and programs indicate inconsistencies between schools in the way they prepare students living with disability for transitions from primary to high school and high to post-school. Current and past students varied in their satisfaction with post-school guidance and planning, and several students reported the support they have received is insufficient. Both student cohorts shared experiences that reflected the importance of high-quality, thorough post-school transition planning for students living with disability via one-to-one and whole class activities.

Parents/carers provided examples of good practice when it comes to supporting successful transitions, with key elements being early planning, and proactivity and support from school leadership and teachers. Other parents/carers talked about issues with different transition points, including low expectations around what students could do after school and long lead times around asset modifications needed to support their child.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▸ Ensure all students experience thorough post-school transition planning, via one-to-one and whole class activities.

▸ Provide adequate information around lead times and modification requirements to parents/carers to ensure all steps are taken to facilitate smooth transition points for students.

"I feel really disappointed in that… the only options that have been provided to us are all the disability providers and the days programs. I have the same expectations for him as I do for my girls and that's for him to have a paid job and be doing further education and with a view to being able to move into his own place one day."

Parent

Both student cohorts shared experiences that reflected the importance of high-quality, thorough post-school transition planning for students living with disability via one-to-one and whole class activities.

Workforce education

"So when I have come across teachers who are really overwhelmed at the idea of having [X] in their classroom, their attitude is that, 'I didn't pick that elective in school. That's not something that I signed up for.'

Parent

Parents/carers shared a range of experiences regarding teachers' attitudes and preparedness to include their child. Parents/carers felt that the topics on disability, behaviour, and inclusive education practices in general pre-service teacher education programs is limited. Parents/carers also suggested support for teachers from schools and the Department is inadequate and increasing workloads and limited planning time is impacting teachers' capacity to appropriately support students living with disability.

Current and past students and parents/carers shared a range of experiences with SLSOs. Many were positive stories with students having good relationships with SLSOs and feeling well supported with their learning. Students and parents/carers raised the potential barriers that SLSOs can create to regular social experiences among students living with disability and their peers.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▸ Implement changes to pre-service education and ongoing professional learning to ensure all school staff are equipped for the diverse abilities, needs, and preferences of students.

▸ Provide greater guidance for schools around best practice for SLSOs working with students along with further training and guidance for SLSOs.

"If I asked the SLSO to leave because I was able to be left alone, they (other students) just treated me normally."

Past student

Many were positive stories with students having good relationships with SLSOs and feeling well supported with their learning.

Education settings

"Mainstream education benefits everyone, from the students with a disability, to the other students, to the support staff, to the teachers. This should just be the given."

Past student

There was discussion among all three cohorts about the different education settings operating in NSW and the effect of the setting on experiences and outcomes of students living with disability. Current students indicated more adults are available in class and teaching and learning takes a slower pace in SSPs and support classes. Past students were vocal about differences between mainstream and SSPs and several of them explicitly stated the value of mainstream education being the expectation, rather than the exception, for students living with disability.

While we did not encourage debate around different educational settings in the parent focus groups, there were some differences in experiences noted. Parents/carers of SSP students reported more inclusive and welcoming cultures and generally reported less issues at school for their child. Many parents/carers of students in mainstream schools (with children in mainstream classes and support classes) advocated for a move towards greater inclusion in mainstream classes. Some parents/carers suggested there is a lack of understanding in schools around inclusive education and called for greater education and awareness around this.

Key learnings and ideas for action

▶ More work is needed to create inclusive and welcoming cultures in mainstream schools.

▶ Ensure there is a clear understanding of what inclusive education is and educate school communities in line with this.

"I was not made to feel welcome in the two [mainstream] places I went to. [Then] I was taken up to the SSP and 'welcome, this is where your son will be. This is what we'll do. We do this. We have assemblies. Everyone is there. The range of kids is from all disabilities, complex, medical, there's high support.' It's a school about 110 people. He's really welcomed there, and his needs can be met because he had personal care issues, and so therapists were allowed to go in… I was welcomed."

Parent

Thank you

Thank you to each participant for generously giving their time and sharing their lived experiences for this research. It is through the sharing of these stories that changes can happen to build an inclusive education system for all students and their families.