

# “I think the teachers need more help”

Voices of experience  
from students with  
disability in Australia

**CYDA Youth Education Survey 2022**

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**Content note:** Discussion of examples of ableism, discrimination, abuse, physical and cyber bullying, and suicidal ideation

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# Executive summary



## Background

Research evidence consistently demonstrates that children and young people with disability fare less well than their peers in education. School aged students with disability are segregated, suspended, and expelled at higher rates. Over the last fifteen years, the highest level of educational attainment for people with disability has improved, but this level still remains lower than children and young people without disability. These inequities can have lifelong implications.

## About this survey

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) has been gathering feedback on educational experiences from its members via formal surveys since 2010. These surveys have consistently found that students with disability are excluded in their education. For the first time this survey sought to specifically focus on the voices and perspectives of young people in education.

Prior surveys have elicited some responses from this group but have tended to be primarily completed by families and caregivers. The survey was also provided with Auslan interpretation and captioned videos.

Survey questions were about the types of services and supports accessed, how welcoming and supportive schools are, whether students experience exclusion and bullying and how well-equipped teachers and schools are perceived to be in meeting the needs of children and young people with disability. Responses were collected from October 2022 to January 2023. CYDA partnered with researchers from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne and Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra to analyse the data and prepare this report.



## Results

The results suggest that a significant proportion of students with disability do not feel included in all activities within their schools. 70% of respondents indicated that they felt excluded from events and activities within their schooling. Some of this exclusion was experienced around activities such as camps and excursions, but others reported this within everyday teaching activities or social interactions within schooling.

65% of those who responded to a question about bullying reported that they had experienced this in school. Often bullying was reported as being due to their disability or other identity differences. Some of this bullying is verbal in nature, but there are also reports of physical bullying, sometimes resulting in significant injuries. For some this bullying extended to out of school settings and into the realm of cyberbullying through social media. For some this bullying experience had led them to not want to attend school or avoid using disability aides in school settings.

When asked what might improve school experiences, a large majority suggested that school staff would benefit from greater training. Many felt that teachers do not have the right sort of training and skills to be able to interact with and make accommodations for students with disability. A number of respondents also wanted to see more teachers with personal experience of disability or to be trained by people with disability so that they better understand the types of barriers and enablers to inclusive education. Respondents also acknowledged that teachers need to be given the time and resources to apply any training in a classroom context.

While a number of regulations and policies exist to facilitate inclusive education within Australian schools, it is clear that gaps still exist and students with disability still experience exclusion and physical and psychological bullying. Such experiences present substantial barriers to full and equal participation in education and this can have lifelong impacts in terms of health, wellbeing and social inclusion.

## Limitations

Limitations of this research include that it represents a relatively small sample of 231 students with disability, and not everyone answered all of the questions in the survey. The survey was designed to be similar in approach to those conducted previously with parents to explore whether disabled students experience the same types of issues as caregivers report. However, some of the language in the survey may have been less familiar to children and young people and would benefit from better targeting in future iterations. Furthermore, 78% of respondents were from Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales meaning there was not proportional representation across all Australian states and territories. For these reasons, we should be careful not to assume that the responses to this survey are necessarily reflective of the issues encountered in the education of children and young people with disability across Australia.

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# Introduction



**There are pressing issues faced by students with disability in Australia's educational landscape. There are persistent gaps and systemic barriers that exacerbate inequalities in educational attainment. Despite concerted efforts through various educational reforms over the past decade, a significant achievement gap remains.**

Here we report findings from the Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA)'s online National Education Survey that focuses on educational experiences and challenges encountered by this demographic. The concerning implications of educational disparities are evident and are known to result in long-term impacts, such as higher poverty rates, lower employment, and social isolation among people with disabilities.

Australia's Disability Strategy (1) notes *“Despite educational reforms over the last decade, there remain significant gaps for students with disability. These gaps are notable in attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and participation in university studies”* (p. 22). Within the education and learning component of this strategy, priority two focuses on building capability in the delivery of inclusive education to improve educational outcomes for school students with disability. The Productivity Commission study report on their review of the National School Reform Agreement (2) also notes that there are persistent gaps in education outcomes for some cohorts of students, which are generated by systemic barriers. Concerningly, they note that these gaps cannot be measured for students with disability despite being identified as a priority cohort due to a lack of consistent data tracking of educational outcomes.

Research evidence consistently demonstrates that children and young people with disability fare less well than their peers in education. Students with disability are segregated, suspended, and expelled at higher rates. Over the last fifteen years, the highest level of educational attainment for people with disability has improved, but this level still remains lower than children and young people without disability (3). These inequities can have lifelong implications. Research shows that people with disability are more likely to experience poverty, are less likely to be in work, and more likely to be socially isolated (4, 5, 6, 7).

CYDA is the national representative organisation for children and young people (aged 0–25) with disability. CYDA is a not-for-profit community organisation that provides a link from the direct experiences of children and young people with disability and their families to federal government and other key stakeholders. CYDA has been gathering feedback on educational experiences from its members via formal surveys since 2010 (8). CYDA's online National Education Survey began in 2015 to deepen this understanding of the kinds of issues children and young people face in education systems. These surveys have consistently found that students with disability are excluded in their education.

For the first time this survey sought to specifically focus on the voices and perspectives of young people in education. Prior surveys have elicited some responses from this group but have tended to be primarily completed by families and caregivers. The survey was also provided with Auslan interpretation and captioned videos.

The report is structured as follows. In the first section we provide background to the policy and evidence surrounding students with disability in education. We also provide detail of how the survey was distributed and analysed. Following this we then move in to reporting the findings, starting with the demographics of the respondents. We then move on to how students rate schools in terms of them being welcoming and supportive and reflections on how well-trained teachers and other educators are in supporting students in a way that suits their preferences. We then present data relating to exclusion and bullying, identifying in free text responses some experiences of significant bullying in schools and also outside of schools via social media.

The final findings section moves on to report student experiences of learning support and learning materials. Having set out the findings we then move on to consider what these mean in terms of support for students with disability.

We find that although there are a number of regulations and policies to facilitate inclusive education within Australian schools, it is clear that gaps still exist and students with disability still experience exclusion and physical and psychological bullying. Such experiences present substantial barriers to full and equal participation in education and this can have lifelong impacts in terms of health, wellbeing and social inclusion.



*For the first time this survey sought to specifically focus on the voices and perspectives of young people in education. Prior surveys have elicited some responses from this group but have tended to be primarily completed by families and caregivers.*



# Background and approach

Australia was one of the first signatories to the United National Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2006, which obliges the provision of accommodations and support to access the general educational system ‘on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live’. Federally the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, the Education Act 1989 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Reviewed 2015) have followed broader trends in many advanced economies moving policy towards a more inclusive, less segregated approach to the full involvement of students with diagnosed intellectual, physical, sensory or learning disabilities into mainstream classes.

There is a strong evidence base to suggest that inclusive education is beneficial not only for children and young people with disability, but all students (9). Inclusive education is guided by an understanding about reasonable adjustments, which stipulates that a teacher or school make adjustments that enable a student with disability to participate in the classroom and demonstrate their learning while not placing an unnecessary burden on the student, their peers or their teacher.

Despite the various commitments to inclusive education, a range of reviews and reports (e.g. 2, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15) note that children and young people with disability in all schools still experience inequities. Most recently this has been vividly demonstrated through accounts heard by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

Outside of issues relating to academic attainment we see children and young people face challenges such as teacher preparedness to deal with students with disability (16, 17, 18, 19), a high likelihood of being bullied (20, 21, 22, 23, 24), and experiences of exclusion and rejection (25). This is a problematic situation given that the research evidence demonstrates that students with disability who attend education in inclusive mainstream settings demonstrate positive gains in social competence, friendships, aspirations for livelihoods and independence in adulthood, some gains

in access to broad curriculum, and more access to academic skills (26), with additional benefits evidenced for their non disabled peers and teachers (27). Inequities in education can have lifelong implications. Research shows that people with disability are more likely to experience poverty, are less likely to be in work, and more likely to be socially isolated (4, 5, 6, 28).

Funding for supporting students in Australian schools requires detailed diagnoses and evidence. The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data of School Students (NCCD) with a Disability is a joint initiative of federal, state and territory government and non-government school authorities. Funding is determined and allocated as a ‘Commonwealth student with a disability loading’ based on the NCCD and schools have specific document requirements they must meet with in order to accord with the criteria. Funding is then allocated based on needs they have provided the evidence for and schools have discretion to use this funding to meet the needs of their students, adjusted every 12 months in accordance with their current data. This can be used for many different supports such as specialised technology or other equipment, building modifications or other identified approaches to modifying teaching and learning to meet the students’ differentiated needs for access to the curriculum. The list of the Adjustments the NCCD identifies as suitable are as follows:



- planning
- teaching and learning
- curriculum
- assessment
- reporting
- extracurricular activities
- environment and infrastructure

The amount of funding that a school receives for students with disability varies depending on the number of students with disability in the school and the level of support that they require. Schools are required to use this funding to provide support to students with disability in a way that meets their individual needs. School leadership works to determine how the total funding is allocated. The ways this might be spent include:

- Hiring specialist staff, such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and speech pathologists.
- Purchasing specialist equipment, such as assistive technology.
- Providing training for teachers so they can better understand and meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- Hiring education support staff, such as teacher aides.
- Providing support services, such as counselling and tutoring.
- Making reasonable accommodations in the classroom, such as providing a quiet space for students who need it or allowing students to use assistive technology.

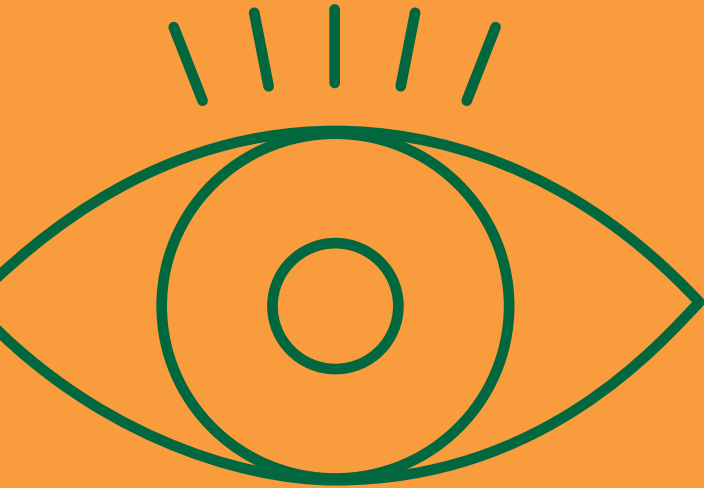
In addition to school-level support, funding from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is provided at an individual level and can also provide 'reasonable and necessary supports' that enable students with disability to go to school. This individualised funding might include things such as: support for daily living activities at school like eating or getting around; necessary equipment or technology; and, support for transitions between schooling levels and into post-school options.

Most state and territory departments also provide curriculum support materials to assist students with disability.

This research is part of CYDA's ongoing commitment to understanding the experience of students with disability in Australia. This survey focuses on the voices of young people with disability. Separate reports provide insight into the views of families and caregivers and another into the experiences of younger children in early childhood education and care (29). Taken together these give a comprehensive view into the experiences and challenges of children and young people with disability in education. The survey asks a range of questions relating to the demographic circumstances of students, the types of services and supports accessed, perceptions of resources available and training of professionals, whether students have experienced exclusion, seclusion or bullying, and experiences with making complaints. The survey was launched on 24 October 2022 and stayed open until 23 January 2023, with the majority of responses received during November 2022. This survey was also provided with Auslan interpretation and captioned videos.

CYDA sought the assistance of researchers from the Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra and Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne to analyse data and prepare this report. While the survey received 231 individual responses, figures in tables may not always add up to 231, because some respondents skipped some questions, and for some questions respondents were able to select multiple answers. We report quantitative findings in relation to raw numbers of participants who responded to each question, with percentages where appropriate (expressed as a percentage of responses rather than total participants). Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100. For most questions, qualitative data provided in text boxes helped to explain reasons for particular responses or provided additional relevant experiences and insights. To demonstrate the spread of responses from different respondents we have given each respondent a participant ID, included at the start of each quote.

# Findings





## Demographics of survey responses

Respondents were asked what age they are. As shown in Table 1, responses were received from all age groups, with the majority in age groups over 12. Respondents were asked if they received help in completing the survey. While 34% did, 66% completed the survey without assistance. This assistance primarily came from mothers (62%), but 19% also came from family and parents (7%).

**Table 1: Age of young person**

| How old are you? | No.        | %  |
|------------------|------------|----|
| Under 10 years   | 13         | 6  |
| 10–12 years      | 33         | 14 |
| 13–15 years      | 56         | 24 |
| 16–18 years      | 72         | 31 |
| 19–25 years      | 57         | 25 |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>231</b> |    |

In terms of where these young people were located, as Table 2 shows, individuals were located across all states and territories, but with the majority across the Eastern states and the Northern Territory particularly underrepresented.

**Table 2: State or Territory located in**

| What state or territory do you live in? | No.        | %  |
|---|------------|----|
| QLD                                     | 78         | 34 |
| VIC                                     | 56         | 24 |
| NSW                                     | 45         | 20 |
| WA                                      | 22         | 10 |
| SA                                      | 15         | 7  |
| ACT                                     | 9          | 4  |
| TAS                                     | 5          | 2  |
| NT                                      | 1          | 0  |
| <b>Total</b>                            | <b>231</b> |    |

As Table 3 demonstrates, the majority of respondents are located in metropolitan areas, although there is representation across all area types.

**Table 3: Type of area lived in**

| What type of area do you live in? | No.        | %  |
|-----------------------------------|------------|----|
| Metropolitan area                 | 133        | 58 |
| Regional area                     | 63         | 27 |
| Rural area                        | 20         | 7  |
| Not sure                          | 11         | 2  |
| Remote area                       | 4          | 5  |
| <b>Total</b>                      | <b>231</b> |    |

In terms of the gender identity of respondents, males and females responded at a relatively similar level, but with a significant component of people identifying as non-binary (Table 4).

**Table 4: Gender identity of respondents**

| What is your gender identity? | No.        | %  |
|-------------------------------|------------|----|
| Male                          | 95         | 41 |
| Female                        | 89         | 39 |
| Non-binary                    | 43         | 19 |
| Other (please specify)        | 4          | 2  |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>231</b> |    |



The vast majority of respondents (86%) are from English speaking backgrounds, with 14% reporting that they come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Similarly, 94% of respondents do not have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait background, while 5% do.

As demonstrated in Table 5, most of the respondents (71%) are currently school students, with a further 21% recently graduating and 7% deciding to leave school early. Free text space was offered to explain why respondents left school early. Three respondents explained it was because they had completed school early (for example after skipping grades) or because they had received a university offer. But for three respondents it was because they had experienced discrimination, as one explains:

*“Disability discrimination and inequality, health issues, mental health”.*

One other respondent explained that:

*“I was expelled and no other school will accept my application”.*

**Table 5: Respondent currently a school student**

| Are you currently a school student? | No.        | %  |
|-------------------------------------|------------|----|
| Yes                                 | 160        | 71 |
| No, I recently graduated            | 48         | 21 |
| No, I decided to leave school early | 16         | 7  |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>224</b> |    |

In terms of the types of schools that respondents attend, at Table 6 demonstrates, nearly half attend public mainstream school, with another quarter at non-government mainstream schools. Just 6% of respondents attend special school and 11% are home schooled or undertake distance education. For those who selected other to this question, free text responses explained they undertook distance learning, adult education, university and TAFEs, special learning programs within mainstream schools, an independent school and a mixture of these schools.

**Table 6: Type of school attended**

| What type of school do you attend?                                    | No.        | %  |
|---|------------|----|
| Public mainstream school (e.g. the local primary or secondary school) | 100        | 46 |
| Non-government mainstream school (e.g. faith-based or private school) | 53         | 24 |
| Home school or distance education                                     | 25         | 11 |
| Other (please specify)  | 20         | 9  |
| Special school  | 12         | 6  |
| Dual enrolment (e.g. you attend both a mainstream and special school) | 5          | 0  |
| Not sure  | 5          |    |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>220</b> |    |

Within schools, just over three quarters attend regular classes, with smaller numbers in a special unit or unsure (Table 7). Of those who selected the other option, respondents attended a mixture of regular and special classes and/or regular classes with support. Some respondents indicated that they also attended gifted and talented classes and one indicated that they attended shorter or fewer classes.

**Table 7: Type of class attended**

| In the mainstream school, what type of class do you attend? | No.        | %  |
|---|------------|----|
| Regular class   | 158        | 77 |
| Other (please specify)                                      | 26         | 6  |
| Special unit  | 12         | 6  |
| Not sure  | 9          | 4  |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>205</b> |    |

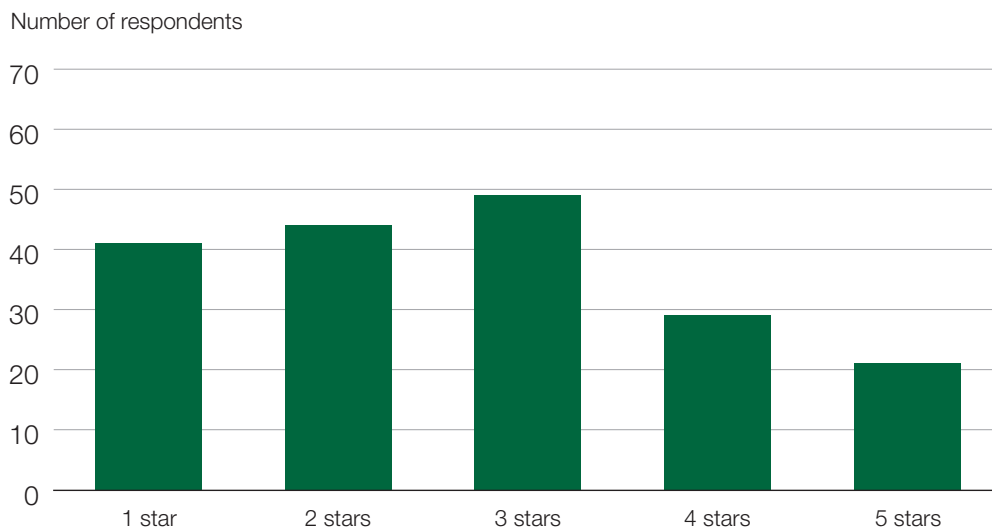




## Are schools welcoming and supportive?

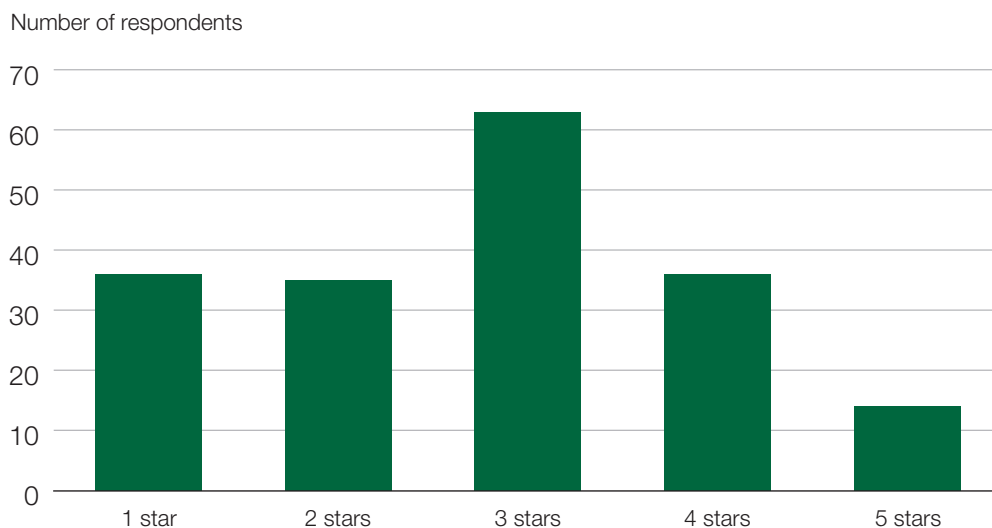
The survey included questions asking respondents to rate their experiences at school out of five stars (where 1 is not great and 5 is excellent). In respect to whether respondents felt welcome and included at school, Figure 1 demonstrates that 22% rated 1 star, 24% 2 stars, 27% 3 stars, 16% 4 stars and just 11% 5 stars.

**Figure 1: Rating of feeling welcome and included at school**



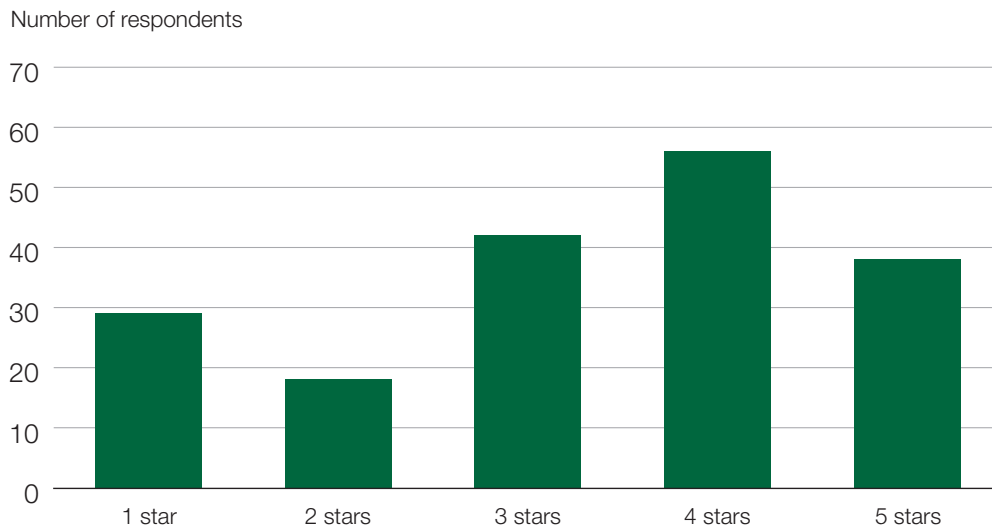
In respect to the degree that respondents felt they had been supported to learn and experience activities at school, Figure 2 demonstrates that of those who answered this question (184), 34% ranked their experience as 3 stars, this is the single largest group. A further 20% selected 1 star, 19% 2 stars, 20% 4 stars and just 8% as 5 stars.

**Figure 2: Rating of experience of support to learn and experience activities at school**



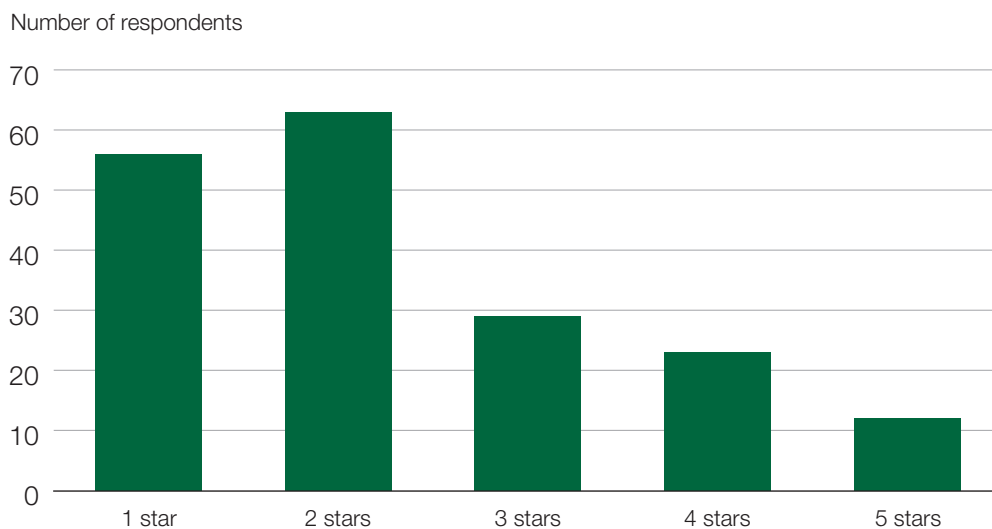
Respondents were also asked to rate whether teachers and support staff have high expectations of them and their learning. As Figure 3 demonstrates, there were higher ratings of this than the two previous questions. Three quarters of the rankings were 3 stars or more (3 stars, 23%, 4 stars 31%, 5 stars 21%). 16% of respondents rated one star and 10% rated 2 stars.

**Figure 3: Rating of teachers and support staff having high expectations of students and their learning**



In relation to whether respondents felt that teachers and support staff have the training and knowledge to support them in a way that suits their needs and preferences, respondents were less positive (Figure 4). 64% of respondents rates this 1 star (305) or 2 stars (34%). 16% of respondents rated their experience as 3 stars, 13% as 4 stars and 7% as 5 stars.

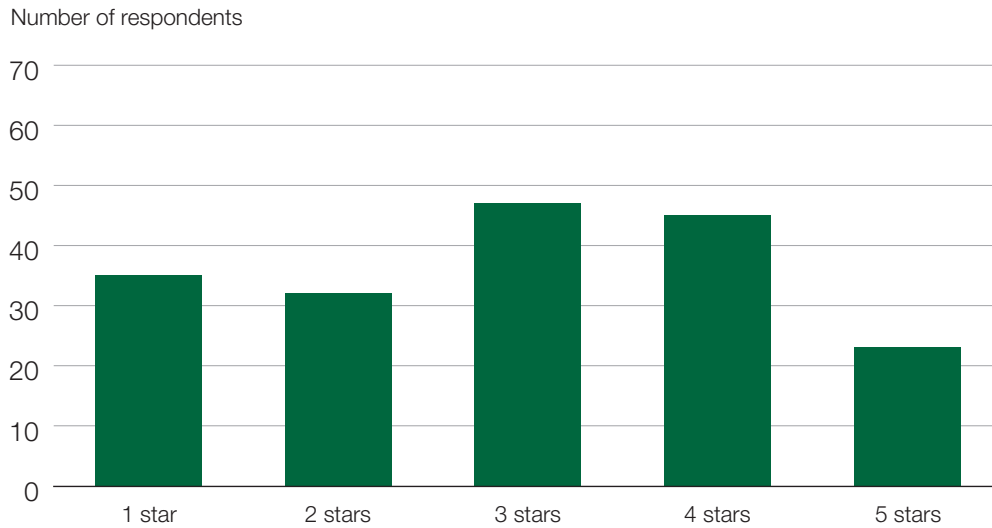
**Figure 4: Rating of training and knowledge of teachers and support staff to support students in a way that suits their needs and preferences**





Respondents were also asked to reflect on their experience of opportunities to get involved and do the same things as other students. As Figure 5 demonstrates, responses to this question were mixed, with 19% rating 1 star, 18% 2 stars, 26% 3 stars, 25% 4 stars and 13% 5 stars.

**Figure 5: Rating of opportunities to get involved and do the same things as other students**







## Exclusion and bullying



**Content warning:** The material in this section reports on first hand experiences of violence young people have experienced.

Table 8 shows responses to a question about whether respondents had ever been or felt excluded from activities at their school. As this Table demonstrates, of those who responded to this question, 70% had experienced exclusion. A free text option was offered to respondents to provide detail about how they had experienced this and 105 responses were received, which is far more than we can do justice here. But there were some key themes in these responses about the nature of the exclusion that has been experienced or felt by students with disability.

**Table 8: Feelings of exclusion from events and activities**

| Have you been or felt excluded from events and activities at your school? | No. | %  |
|---|-----|----|
| Yes   | 139 | 70 |
| No  | 60  | 30 |
| Total   | 199 |    |

A very common experience reported for students with disability is that they are not able to participate in camps, excursions, and other events. This was reported as being frustrating by many, particularly as these activities were often seen as 'rewards':

*"There are certain events that my school used as rewards (jumping castles, trips to the beach, etc) that I could not participate in due to my disability".*

Some respondents reported that they had been allowed to attend some of these, but only where a parent or aide had been present, for example:

*"Camps, excursions, assemblies cannot go unless mum is there with me. I have to go home if my aide and teacher isn't there even if I'm fine, I've even been sent home on a just in case day".*



*"Due to me being non-verbal there is a huge barrier. Because my teachers haven't been trained very well it's hard and I get failed. I'm pretty clever but just can't verbalise it. I might know the answer but can't express it. I think it's unfair that I get failed on my report card. I think the teachers need more help since there going to be more kids like me coming to mainstream school".*



Transportation often also served to exclude students from their peers as it is not able to accommodate some:

*“Because there are no wheelchair accessible buses I have to travel in a separate taxi or mum takes me to school or on excursions”.*

Sports activities and physical education lessons were also described often as being inaccessible and in many cases alternatives were not offered. As one respondent explained:

*“Due to physical impairments for things like going on long walks if we have excursions and days that contain a lot of PE i just have to sit out for them and do nothing”.*

Some of the responses offered related to young people with sensory impairments and how these lead them to being or feeling excluded. A number of responses from Deaf students explained how they are excluded:

*“All events are not accessible to me as a Deaf person. Captions are never used when videos are on and I’m not allowed to use my live transcribe app because it’s on my phone”.*

Others had similar experiences and explained how interpreters are not available during lunch and break times meaning that these students cannot interact with their peers. Another student who is non-verbal describes:

*“Due to me being non-verbal there is a huge barrier. Because my teachers haven’t been trained very well it’s hard and I get failed. I’m pretty clever but just can’t verbalise it. I might know the answer but can’t express it. I think it’s unfair that I get failed on my report card. I think the teachers need more help since there going to be more kids like me coming to mainstream school”.*

Some respondents explained that they had been excluded from some settings as they were perceived as being disruptive, despite this being part of the presentation of their disability e.g., Tourette Syndrome:

*“Forced to leave classrooms due to being too much of a disruption”.*

Other respondents explained that they were excluded from some events because noise management was not taken into consideration or the impact of bright lights that might lead to sensory overload.

*“All whole school or whole year level events (e.g. assemblies, chapel, sports carnivals, school dances) either make me have meltdowns or panic attacks, even with headphones and fidget devices. These are not accessible to me. This also happens in many school classrooms, which is not accommodated for. I also sometimes go non-verbal, which is not accommodated for. Going to these events themselves is not fully necessary for inclusion but I need a way to access the information everyone else gets at these events”.*

Other respondents talked about experiencing social exclusion and bullying in school. As one respondent described:

*“Mostly from peers. It was never ‘you can’t sit with us’, but people didn’t really talk to me. I never experienced any explicit or obvious exclusion”.*

Below we say more about the topic of bullying as there was a specific question asked about this. Some respondents felt that as they had missed significant amounts of time at school due to illness or not being involved in activities that this had exacerbated bullying or being perceived as different by their peers.

Often these different exclusion experiences were experienced by individuals and these serve to compound. As one respondent explained:

*“No proper access to learning material or curriculum, no support to access playground or school library, etc. No support to participate in overall school activities like sports”.*

The survey also asked respondents if they had experienced bullying at school. As Table 9 demonstrates, of those who responded to this question, 65% had experienced bullying and a further 13% preferred not to answer this question. A free text response was included for those who wanted to share their experiences. There were just under a hundred free text responses to this question. Although some of these responses were to indicate that respondents had been bullied many times over their schooling but they did not want to recount specifics of these incidences as that would prove retraumatizing.

**Table 9: Experiences of bullying in school**

| Have you experienced bullying at school? | No.        | %  |
|--|------------|----|
| Yes                                      | 129        | 65 |
| No                                       | 44         | 22 |
| Prefer not to answer                     | 25         | 13 |
| <b>Total</b>                             | <b>198</b> |    |

However, some did share their experiences and it is clear from these responses that the bullying experienced was directly related to their disability. As one respondent explained:

*“Because of my differences I have been made fun of for things like my limp, crutch and prosthetic”.*

For others, they had experienced bullying because of other elements of their identity:

*“I’m queer, trans, autistic and use a mobility aid, I get called every queer/disabled slur under the sun. Plus people bully me because I’m autistic.”*



*“I have had my face photoshopped into a multitude of things and shared across social media platforms. I have been teased for the way I look and talk, called an old man because of the hair on my body. I have been mocked for the tilt of my head and neck. I have been trapped in the school lockers by students, who proceeded to throw rocks at me. At one point, I was hospitalised after having my head smashed to the ground by another student”.*



Although much of the bullying experienced came from other students, ten respondents noted that some of this bullying was also experienced from teachers and teacher aides. As one respondent explained,

*“My teacher pulled my hair and all the teachers were mean and got me out of my class a lot”.*

Some of the bullying experienced was verbal in nature. As one respondent explained:

*“I was throwing up a lot due to medication in primary school. The kids started calling me “vomit girl”. I also experienced some issues due to being in a wheelchair part time”.*

Many respondents also described being physically bullied and to significant extents, for example:

*“I was bullied all throughout primary and high school, though it got significantly worse in high school, the worse it got was having my arm severely broken and my laptop smashed”.*

Another respondent explained that:

*“I was verbally abused, the person said i was fucked up in the head retard that should go and kill himself because i have nothing to be successful with. People threw fruit at me and i was badly bruised on the back. People threw cans of coke at me to. I was thrown into a bin.”*

Alongside these experiences of bullying with school, cyber bullying was highlighted by some respondents as being experienced. In the following quote this was experienced alongside a number of other forms of bullying:

*“I have had my face photoshopped into a multitude of things and shared across social media platforms. I have been teased for the way I look and talk, called an old man because of the hair on my body. I have been mocked for the tilt of my head and neck. I have been trapped in the school lockers by students, who proceeded to throw rocks at me. At one point, I was hospitalised after having my head smashed to the ground by another student”.*

In some cases, respondents explained how the bullying they had experienced lasted their entire schooling experience:

*“Primary school – was made the monster in monster games. Was very scared and threatened. High school – issues more not accepted as treated as an acquaintance versus friend. Also last to be picked for groups. Makes it hard and impacts self-esteem”.*

As a result of bullying some respondents said that it made them not want to attend school or not to use any aides within a school setting. One respondent experienced both of these issues explaining

*“I wore sensory aids and used to be mocked and whispered about, so I ended up hardly wearing them while I did In person school (I’ve now switched to distance Ed for year 10, onwards) leading for me to be overwhelmed constantly. Alongside the fact that I’m transgender; invasive questions were constantly asked and people made comments about how I want a real boy”.*

Here we have presented just a few of the survey responses and there were very many other similar experiences. This suggests a large number of those who responded to the survey regularly experience significant bullying and exclusion and this has impacts for physical and mental health as well as ability to engage in learning activities.



## Learning support and learning materials

Respondents were asked whether they have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place. Of the 203 individuals who answered this question, as Table 10 shows, just under 60% of respondents do have an IEP and just over 10% are not sure if they have one. The survey contained another question asking those who had an IEP whether they were involved in creating the IEP. More respondents answered this question than indicated they had an IEP so the responses may not be entirely accurate. In total 190 people responded to this question, despite only 119 indicating that they had an IEP. Of these responses, 58 indicated that they had been involved in the development of the IEP. These numbers suggest that less than half of those with IEPs were involved in its development but given the lack of clarity in terms of response rates this requires some further investigation.

**Table 10: Number of respondents with IEP in place**

| Do you have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place? | No.        | %  |
|--|------------|----|
| Yes  | 119        | 59 |
| No   | 61         | 30 |
| Not sure   | 23         | 11 |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>203</b> |    |

Of those who responded to a question about whether they are a NDIS participant (201), 67% indicated that they are and 33% are not. A free text option was also offered for this question where 11 comments were added. Of these, 6 indicated that they were still going through the application process. Two had only been recently formally diagnosed. For one respondent they explained,

*“I can’t afford the further testing to get ndis funding at the moment”.*

Another commented that the

*“NDIS doesn’t support people with ADHD”.*

Of those in receipt of NDIS funding, just 13% indicated that they received NDIS funded supports in school. A further 27% did not know, but 60% do not receive NDIS funded supports in school. Those who were in receipt of NDIS funded supports in school used these for things such as: Teacher aides and support, Speech therapy, Speaker system and text to speech, Diet prescription, Wheelchair, Stroller and Support dog.

Respondents were also asked if they receive specific support at school because of their disability or learning difference. Of those who responded to this question (204), 76% did receive supports, 20% did not and 5% were not sure. Of those who received supports, the majority was in terms of changes to school curriculum and help from staff (Table 11).

**Table 11: Supports received in school**

| If yes, what type of support do you receive? (Choose as many that apply)  | No. |
|---|-----|
| Help with school curriculum (changes made to tasks, assessments of materials)   | 111 |
| Help from staff (supervision, individual support worker)  | 95  |
| Help from friends or classmates   | 59  |
| Equipment or technology to help   | 59  |
| Access to specialists (professionals like speech pathologists, physiotherapists, psychologists, music therapists, etc.) | 50  |
| Assistance with personal care (help with everyday tasks like eating, going to the bathroom, medical needs, etc.)        | 27  |
| Other (please specify)  | 17  |
| Not sure  | 7   |



The survey asked respondents whether they had heard about the Disability Standards for Education prior to the survey. Table 12 illustrates the responses to this question and demonstrates that just 10% of respondents know a lot about them and 54% have never heard of these.

**Table 12: Knowledge of the Disability Standards for Education**

| Prior to this survey did you know about the Disability Standards for Education? | No.        | %  |
|---|------------|----|
| No, I've never heard of it  | 111        | 54 |
| Yes, I've heard of it but don't know much about it                              | 54         | 26 |
| Yes, I've heard of it and know a moderate amount                                | 21         | 10 |
| Yes, I've heard of it and know a lot about it                                   | 20         | 10 |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>206</b> |    |

The final question in the survey asked respondents where they would start if they could make schools more inclusive for students with disability. This was a free text response question and over 140 suggestions were added. These free text comments were coded and summarised into a number of key topics and the most frequent ones are set out in Table 13.

**Table 13: Suggestions of how schools could be made more inclusive for students with disability**

| Topics raised in free text – Improvements  | No. |
|--|-----|
| Training for school staff  | 38  |
| Teachers empathise and understand individual, read file/ know student/watch/ask/listen/ involve student in decisions | 19  |
| Teaching and educating other children and connections with them  | 15  |
| Increase flexibility around e.g. curriculum, timing, attendance, sports  | 11  |
| Better access including wheelchair, ramp, rail and elevator access and attitude to wheelchairs/stigma                | 6   |
| More teacher supports and aides  | 4   |

The majority of these suggestions relate to training for school staff. Respondents suggested that they do not feel that all teachers have the skills and training to be able to interact with and to make accommodations for students with disability. Some respondents also wanted to see more teachers with personal experience of disability as a way of making them more aware of some of the types of issues that students with disability might face. As one respondent explained:

*“Have ALL teachers have training on disability, neurodiversity, medical issues and mental illnesses from people who are disabled themselves or have a very close connection to disability. All new teachers should undergo this training before they are in the school environment. It should start there.”*

But respondents also suggested that just having this training is not enough for teachers to be responsive to disabled students. They also need to have the ability and resources to apply any learning in a classroom context. This factor is linked to the fourth category of being able to increase flexibility around curriculum, attendance and sports activities.

Respondents were also keen for work to be done with other students so that they could better understand disability and help to facilitate interaction within classrooms. As one respondent explained, some of the current way that accommodations are dealt with are through segregation within schools or via provision of paid supports and this can undermine inclusion:

*“Support with friendships and be included in groups. Facilitating better connections with the mainstream school rather than for staffing / school logistics grouping all the “disability” kids together. Real risk builds a model of reliance on paid supports. Rather than connection and support with peers which is what regular kids rely on”.*

It is clear from these responses that teachers are viewed as integral to the experience of students with disability in schools and classrooms and that many currently feel that these staff are not well equipped to support inclusion.



*“Have ALL teachers have training on disability, neurodiversity, medical issues and mental illnesses from people who are disabled themselves or have a very close connection to disability. All new teachers should undergo this training before they are in the school environment. It should start there.”*

# What do these findings mean?





As outlined in the background, this is the first time that CYDA has offered a survey on educational experience that is specifically targeted towards children and young people and was also translated into Auslan for accessibility. Although the sample size for the survey is relatively small (n=231), this is a significant contribution given that there is somewhat of a gap within the current research evidence relating to the specific experiences of children and young people with disability in the education system. The survey was designed to be similar in nature to those that CYDA has previously conducted with parents to explore whether disabled students experience the same types of challenges as caregivers report. However, one of the limitations of this is that some of the language in the survey may relate more to the system and this may be less familiar to students and future iterations may be better targeted towards how young people actually experience school.

## Exclusion

What is clear from the data presented here is that students with disability face some significant exclusion in schools. This comes in the form of excursions and other events offered as rewards, but also from more common activities within schools such as physical education classes. Looking at each of these in turn provides further insight into the systemic factors that create the exclusionary experiences the young people in the survey are describing.

With regards to transport on excursions, the young people explain that they were often expected to travel separately from their peers, with support and attendance of their parents required if they were to participate. 70% of students reported being excluded from excursions and buses. Australian law requires all public transport services, including buses, to be accessible to people with disabilities. This mandate is part of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002, which are enforced by the Australian Human Rights Commission. These standards cover a wide range of accessibility issues for public transport, such as clear paths of travel, boarding devices (like ramps or lifts) for people who use mobility aids, allocated spaces for wheelchairs, and accessibility information for passengers. In contrast, school buses in Australia are not mandated to be fully compliant with these standards. In many cases, accessibility accommodations are provided as needed, often in the form of specialised transport services for students with disabilities. Implementation can vary depending on region and the specific bus company involved and policy is at the state level.



Where mentioned in state policy, students with needs for specialised transport are expected to travel separately and there are no compliance expectations for inclusion in day to day or excursion bus or transport services that allow for students with mobility needs to travel with their peers. The policies from state to state all identify disability transport as a different form of transport. There are no regulations to date that identify school transport contracts to ensure accessible vehicles, leaving transport a continuous space of exclusion, even in travel to inclusive education settings. As the data from this survey shows, this can be experienced as exclusionary for those students not able to travel with their peers.

The second area that the young people in this survey reported as significant in their experiences of exclusion was in Physical Education (PE) and Sports classes. Many young people report that they were not offered accessible options or were sat on the sidelines in some or all of their PE or Sport Classes. This is a phenomenon reported in the research literature world-wide despite there being evidence that inclusive PE and Sport benefits not only students with disabilities but also those without (30, 31). PE and Sports classes can be offered in ways which are strength informed and can include all students (32), offering opportunities for social interaction and deeper understanding of individual lived experiences. However this requires approaches that move beyond creating a space for students with disability to 'fit in' to existing activity. When various instructional strategies, equipment, and ways of engaging in the activities are offered to all students there is less likely to be moments of teaching and learning that stigmatise students.

Working with student with disabilities outside of class to identify accessible options before classes are planned can also offer PE teachers an opportunity to build understanding of the individual students learning aims for PE. It can also offer an opportunity for the student to develop agency and advocacy skills for life-long access to physical activity (33).

## **Bullying**

One of the most confronting parts of the data collected through this survey is the degree to which students with disability face bullying within schools. While much of this is reported to be from other students, there are also reports of teacher to student bullying in the data. There are substantial reports of physical and psychological bullying and through the use of social media this is not just confined to school settings but can also reach into life beyond school. As seen above, 65% of those surveyed had experienced bullying, some with serious physical injuries requiring hospitalisation.

There is a substantial literature that reports on the implications of experiencing bullying in school. Children with disability are more likely to experience violence than their non-disabled peers (34, 35). The research into the experiences of bullying of students with disability is difficult to comparatively analyse with the respondents of this survey, as much of the research reports on the experiences of young people with a specified disability. Moreover, there is also no clear evidence as to whether bullying is less likely to occur in inclusive settings in comparison to segregated special schools. Classroom assistants and support staff play a crucial role in bullying prevention and fostering inclusion (36). However, these staff need to be careful to ensure that their actions do not unintentionally limit social interactions and increase social distance among students (37).

Staff need to be well trained and supported to balance academic support with social integration. What is clear across the research is that if students are not integrated into peer groups, school settings are likely to be a site where students can experience exclusion and other forms of violence (38) and that proximity with peers does not guarantee acceptance or a positive educational experience, positive social interactions or friendships (14, 39).

Based on a systematic review of existing research into student with disability experiences of bullying, researchers make several suggestions for successful interventions in the prevention of bullying (40):

- directly address bullying through consistent, equitable and accessible communication,
- enhance social skills,
- promote emotional education,
- achieve an improvement in interpersonal relationships,
- address inequities in the educational system and
- inform ethical decisions with agency focussed on the student with disability.

Inclusion, when done well, can be effective in reducing bullying (41). Such approaches emphasise the promotion of interpersonal relationships and social-emotional education (42). Work needs to be focussed on wellbeing programs that highlight the “richness of diversity as a learning agent and that promotes personalized teaching focused on the needs and concerns of the students” (43: pg. 860). But teachers require support from school leadership, positive attitudes towards inclusion and a strong sense of efficacy in working in a classroom with diverse educational needs in order for this to be effective. The benefits of inclusive education arise from the quality of interactions (44). This requires fostering meaningful, respectful interactions among all students, creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.



*One of the most confronting parts of the data collected through this survey is the degree to which students with disability face bullying within schools. While much of this is reported to be from other students, there are also reports of teacher to student bullying in the data.*

## Teacher training

Many respondents expressed the belief that teachers are not sufficiently trained and equipped to adequately support students with disability. Without this sort of support, students with disability are often treated as different to their peers and other students may pick up on this. One of the strong suggestions in the data is that teachers should be trained by people with disability so that there is a *lived experience* component to this process. This is supported by research where indications are that teachers and pre-service teachers benefit from personal contact with people with disability and insight from the lived experience of people with disability (45, 46). Such approaches in combination with work around social emotional learning can help to develop firsthand understanding of the barriers and challenges that students with and without disability may face and can help promote empathy, understanding and develop more effective teaching methods (47).

In summary, this survey has underscored the persistent exclusion and discrimination experienced by children and young people with disabilities in the Australian educational system. The voices of the young people in this study provide vital insights into their experiences, shedding light on systemic barriers to inclusion and revealing the extent of issues such as exclusion from school activities and alarming rates of bullying.

Despite regulations designed to ensure inclusivity, gaps remain, particularly in areas that may be less evident, such as access to excursions. Furthermore, a lack of inclusive approaches in teaching activities reinforces the need for rethinking how these activities are delivered to ensure full and equal participation. Bullying emerged as a significant issue, with a substantial proportion of respondents reporting experiences of both physical and psychological bullying. The study highlights the need for comprehensive and effective anti-bullying strategies that extend beyond the school gates and into digital spaces. Several strategies are available in the research literature to address these. Central among these is the need for improved teacher training, specifically training informed by people with disabilities to incorporate lived experiences into the educational process. Research indicates that this will enable teachers to better understand and support their students, while reducing the likelihood of students with disabilities being treated differently. The data here points to a stark reality: children with disabilities continue to face substantial barriers to their full and equal participation in education and this can have lifelong impacts in terms of health, wellbeing and social inclusion outcomes. It is incumbent upon educational institutions, teachers and other members of the school community and policy makers to address these challenges and work towards a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

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