



What young people said

Inclusive Education



About this paper

This paper is a summary of the thoughts and reflections of young people with disability who attended the 2023 National Youth Disability Summit (the Summit) on the topic of inclusive education.

The 2023 Summit was the third of its kind, run by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA). It was a two-day hybrid event, with participants from all over Australia, taking part online or in person at Burgmann College in Canberra. It was attended by 60 young people with disability between the ages of 12 and 25.

The Summit was co-designed by CYDA's Youth Council, made up of 12 young people with disability. The Youth Council chose the topics for discussion, the speakers, the location and the activities of the Summit.

The three discussion topics chosen by the Youth Council for the 2023 Summit were:

- **diagnosis**
- **inclusive education**
- **self-care**

This paper is one of three, summarising what young people said at the Summit about each of the three topics.



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Summary

In discussions on inclusive education, young people talked about the need to end segregated education. They talked about access to inclusive education as a human right, but also about the need to normalise disability in classrooms for non-disabled students, to reflect the reality of disabled people, and reduce discrimination, in other areas of society.

There was a strong focus on the need for compulsory teacher training on disability and inclusion, including education on disability culture, preferred language, and identity.

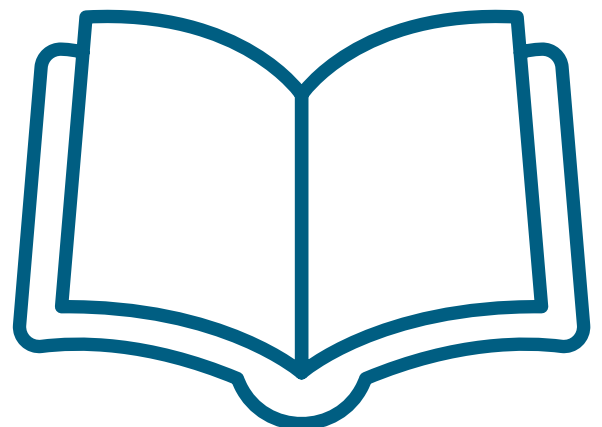
Young people also talked about the need for disability inclusion training for students. They viewed this as a way to address bullying and to encourage non-disabled students to be allies, both at school and in the world outside school.

Young people talked about the benefits of flexibility in the classroom and student-led approaches to learning. They spoke about the need for an overhaul of the current one-size-fits-all approach to education, to build a system that caters to diverse learning styles and needs.

They spoke about the need for more intersectional approaches to inclusive education, respectful of the needs of diverse marginalised communities.

Young people also spoke about the need for more awareness around what kinds of accommodations are, or should be, available. Students often don't know what will help, or what they can ask for, until it is offered. They also spoke about the struggle of trying to have their access needs met, even when they did know their rights, due to misconceptions or biases amongst school staff.

Those who had been through the system also has words of encouragement and solidarity for those at the start of their journey.





What young people said



The following quotes have been de-identified to protect the privacy of young people who attended the Summit.

On the need for resources and training for educators:

'I think, a big part of it is giving more, like, resources and training and space for educators to learn. Especially when, for so long, we haven't spoken about disability ... So, we can't expect people to just know.'

'From the perspective now of an educator ... inclusion looks like integrated learning. Because realistically ... we're not just improving disabled people's interaction with abled people - because that's our whole lives, right? - but ... the awareness of our abled peers. We're increasing their empathy, we're increasing their knowledge, so that when they come across some other disabled person in their life, they're like: "Oh, I see you, and I get it, and what can I do for you?" ... and where there's a real lack, and why that doesn't happen, is because there's no mandatory training for teachers to do inclusion training ... It's a major that you can undertake if you want to - the majority don't. So, for that to happen ... we need to overhaul the entire education system, starting with teacher training.'

'I believe that as part of [teacher] inclusion training, there should be trauma training, because I feel like there has to be some kind of acknowledgement that every disabled person has some level of trauma. Being disabled is traumatic.'

'I also think a lot of education staff need an updated refresher on language and disability etiquette. It feels so demeaning and infantilising to always hear euphemistic language. Terms such as "differently abled", "special needs", and "challenged/challenging", feel really isolating to have used to refer to me. Not feeling comfortable using the word "disabled" makes me feel like my disabilities are bad things. I wish teachers could use correct language and help me feel empowered in my disabled identity.'

'I definitely think teachers need to be taught about disabilities because otherwise teachers will label students with disabilities as "naughty", "defiant", "rude", "a distraction" and even "abusive".'



What young people said

On the right to inclusive education:

'[Inclusive education] is like the bare minimum of giving every kid a well-rounded education.'

'Inclusive education, to me, looks like being given the same opportunities as everyone else, but also the accommodations that we require to reach that level of bare minimum ... we need that equity.'

"Inclusive education is supposed to be a human right, and in that being denied, disabled young people are not given access to the basic requirements of humanity, which is unacceptable."



On the importance of ending segregation:

'[I]nclusive education looks like no segregation ... the fact that special schools exist, is good for short-term solutions for teachers, but not for the students to be able to survive for the rest of their lives surrounded by people who are able-bodied.'

'I think the misconception that inclusive education would somehow hold non-disabled students back ... is completely wrong, and it is possible to involve everyone without disadvantaging anyone.'

"Disability does not and cannot exist in isolation."



What young people said

On a proactive approach to accommodations:

'[I]t's seen as difficult to try and include young people with disability and make the adjustments that are needed, when it should instead be, you know, proactively attempting to help us be included.'

'[I]f the student doesn't know what they want and doesn't know what could help, it's also a matter of offering it to them.'

'[T]here's no way you're going to get the accommodations you need in education if people aren't recognising your disability, or you don't recognise it yourself, through no fault of your own.'





What young people said

On bias and discrimination in education:

'It's leveling the playing field. Don't feel like you are being disadvantaged just because someone else is having that extra help they need to have a fair go.'

'[P]eople might be like, 'Oh, that's not fair. You get an extra week,' I'm like, yeah, but for two weeks of the month, I'm debilitated, can't move, can't get out of bed. So, like, timing-wise, my day and your day – they say we've all got 24 hours, but do you spend three hours in bed? Like, no, it's not the same 24 hours.'

'I was shut out of classes because they would put it on floors that were not accessible, or the lift would be out, and then I would fail, because I couldn't do attendance, because I couldn't get into the classroom.'

'[It's] also the content being taught. I could have a teacher that makes my class really accessible, but if the content they're teaching is maybe ableist or non-inclusive, then their efforts in accessibility are kind of diminished.'

'[The teachers] were following me up at, like, terrible times. They were [talking] behind my back to other students, making my life so much harder. And my anxiety about when I made it to school was so high ... the stress made me more sick, which made it harder to go, which made me further behind.'

'There's still an element of, "I'm different, I don't fit in, I can't access the world because the world isn't designed for me," which is traumatic.'

'[G]rade seven, grade eight ... that's when my conditions, like, slowly started to kick in. And like, before they kicked in ... I had really good relationships with my peers, and my teachers and everyone, everything was looking nice and dandy. And then ... every semester ... I progressively get a little bit worse, and I'd not be able to do as much as I did previously ... You see people treat you so much more differently, in such a quick amount of time. Like, your best friend will turn into like a stranger, the teacher who used to love you in class now doesn't even walk past your desk.'

"I was heavily bullied which was actively perpetuated by the teaching staff. The times that I did ask for help/support from the staff, I was dismissed and denied, and the bullying was validated through victim-blaming culture of my disabled/autistic traits being seen as "disruptive", "inappropriate", etc. I eventually dropped out of school."



What young people said



On difficulty accessing accommodations:

'[W]e have to fight for those accommodations as well. They don't hand them out willy-nilly. They're not like – 'Oh, here, have another hour on your exam,' It's like, no, no, we have to be like: "Hey, we really need this." ... It's definitely a struggle to get them.'

'I think, like, you're expected to have lots of gratitude for it, and I'm like, no, like, you're giving me what you were supposed to give me. And I'm asking for more and that, like, shouldn't be denied because you've decided this is how, like, you can be treated as a student.'

'I had to stop due to lack of support. I had [a teacher] that came up with a plan with me to be able to get through year 12, and didn't do anything on our list ... none of my teachers understood me.'

'Too often, disabled young people are told that we will have our needs met, and then we get a haphazard [last] minute attempt at it, and no further feedback allowed.'



What young people said

On universal, flexible approaches to learning:

'I think something else that needs to change to make schools more inclusive is presenting all the educational material in lots of different formats. So, giving the students the options to receive printed notes before class ... because people do learn in different ways [and] want to be prepared in different ways.'

'The approach needs to be student centred, with an understanding that two young people can have the same disability and have wildly different presentations or symptoms and different access needs.'

'I think teachers need to learn that they cannot make assumptions about a students' disabilities, because every disabled young person is vastly different. They need to approach working with disabled students in a way where they assume nothing. They ask open and compassionate questions to us, so they can learn from us about what we find helpful.'

'I think we need to be designing schools so that they're already accessible, so that the wheelchair users have choice about where they go.'

"[We need] student centred teaching to make sure that every student's needs are individually met ... You should be able to demonstrate that you know something about purple squishy things. You shouldn't have to write to be able to demonstrate that ... if your preferred mode of communication is verbal or visual or spoken."

'We aren't treated as holistic students who want to learn many things outside of the classroom ... Because there's all these assumptions about what our limitations are, and no one ever asked us, like, "Is this important to you?", like, "What matters to you?"'

'I don't like the current education system. I've seen it destroy my siblings. I've seen it destroy myself. An inclusive education system looks like to me, like individualised learning plans ... setting them up for success ... more funding for teachers to be able to sit down and go over with students, more resources for students. There's evidence now that student-led learning makes students flourish.'



What young people said

'[I]nclusive education means being able to learn in my own way, and in my own time, and being supported through that process. And with teachers or mentors that understand how my brain works, and how I learn, and what I need in education.'

'It is not enough to simply be able to access education, if it is still in a system that is designed around ableism and just for non-disabled people.'

'Fundamentally, I think we need to entirely dismantle and redesign the education system in Australia, because it is not meeting the needs of disabled students and thus, is not inclusive.'



On the need for intersectional approaches:

"[M]y parents met with the heads of my local [primary] school to discuss my access needs. They told the principal that my teachers would have to wear a microphone that connects to my hearing aids and the principal said they wouldn't enforce that or let the teachers know. My parents are culturally diverse and didn't know my rights so didn't know they could advocate for me, and I had to go to different schools.'

'Education, at its core, can be accessible, but if it's not queer friendly or culturally safe for CALD communities, then it isn't inclusive.'



What young people said

On disability awareness training for students:

'I think something else that needs to change to make schools more [T]he stereotypes and the biases that that a lot of young people hold ... it's not really a hundred per cent their fault, you know, it's just like a societal thing. But it's important to just recognise those sort of internal biases [against] other students to be part of your mainstream education journey. So, just recognizing that is a huge step ... if we can build that culture of inclusivity, it'd be a lot easier to do accommodations and such ... [B]ullying is going to be – it's bad enough for, like, a non-disabled kid, but then if you have like, some conditions, yeah, it gets really, really bad.'

'[W]hen I started school, I was not mentally ill, nor was I physically disabled, yet I became both of those things. It was always who I was supposed to be. And I should have been taught that that could happen.'

'[D]isabled people are not made in a factory ... They're not a separate part of the community. You probably know more disabled people than you think. Whether that means people with mental illness or your grandma because she's old. Like, I feel as though often people don't think that they would ever need any kind of support because they're fine now. And, honestly, it doesn't take much to need help. We all need help. But being disabled – it's not that uncommon. So yes, I think that for kids to learn about this stuff, would: A. help them accept, like, disabled kids at the time, like into their community, and B. it would help with the process of understanding if they became disabled at a later time.'

'I could have the most inclusive teachers that make intentional efforts to support me in my educational journey, but I will still face bullying and ableism from my classmates.'

'A change that I think needs to happen is education [for] students on how to be inclusive and allies to their disabled classmates.'



What young people said

'A culture cannot be changed only by educating staff. Schools would be much more inclusive if my fellow classmates knew what disability is, and that it's not a bad thing, or something to make fun of.'

'A change that I think needs to happen is [educating] students on how to be inclusive and allies to their disabled classmates. A culture cannot be changed only by educating staff.'

'[K]ids who aren't around disabled people, and aren't growing up in our culture, they have no idea about us. They don't know the language, and their teachers, their parents, don't know how to teach their kids as well. So, it needs to be included in the curriculum, and preferably by people who know what they're doing.'





What young people said

Peer group advice for young people with disability:

'I feel like the main point I want to make for like, say, young people, is that if it feels unsafe, confrontational or uncomfortable, it's not inclusive, and it's not acceptable.'

'I want other young people to know that they do not have to put up with ridicule, bullying, judgment, pressure, or unjust punishments in learning settings. And if any of these things are happening ... it's not inclusive education.'

'I want other young people to know that, in inclusive education environments, they have the right to speak and to share their views. They are worthy, their voice matters, their thoughts are important. I want them to know that they have the right to feel safe, to feel comfortable, and not only that, to thrive as well.'

'I also want young people to know that they can ask for help and support. And not only that, there's lots of people who are happy to help.'

'I want other disabled young people to know that they are entitled to inclusive education ... for that education to be affirming, accessible and inclusive.'



Thought for educators:

'I want education to be inclusive, of course, but I also want schools to understand that education is not all of our lives; It's not always the most important thing.'

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Acknowledgement of Country:

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this report has been written, reviewed, and produced. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. This is, was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.