

ACYP Submission - Children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings

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About the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, well-being and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*, the functions of ACYP include:

- making recommendations to Parliament, and government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people;
- promoting children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives;
- conducting research into children's issues and monitoring children's well-being;
- holding inquiries into important issues relating to children and young people;
- providing information to help children and young people; and
- preparing, in consultation with the Minister responsible for youth, a three-year, whole-of-government Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (the Plan).

Further information about ACYP's work can be found at: www.acyp.nsw.gov.au

Introduction

The ACYP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Portfolio Committee No 3 - Education inquiry into Children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings.

The Advocate commends the Committee on their willingness to design a parliamentary inquiry that allows greater participation of children and young people and looks forward to continuing to support the Committee on this important work. We know children and young people with disability are experts in their own lives and have the right to be given the opportunity to participate in decisions that impact them. Children and young people with disability demonstrate both insight and resilience and show us that they have a lot to teach the adults in their lives. It is now a matter for us, together with government and other agencies to work together to ensure that all children and young people with disability have an opportunity to participate in decisions that impact on their lives.

For the Committee's ease, this submission draws out the findings relating to education from ACYP's consultation report with children and young people with disability. The report however draws out broader findings that are interrelated to children and young people's experience with education. The full report is available on ACYP's website.

Over a six-month period, from 2019 to 2020, ACYP conducted face-to-face consultations with more than 370 children and young people with disability in partnership with 24 organisations and 45 focus groups. The children and young people who participated in consultations were generous in dedicating their time to share their opinions on what is working well for them, what is not working well for them and what changes they would like to see to make NSW a better place, not just for them but for all children and young people.

Although the voices of children and young people with disability have been included in many of ACYP's previous reports, *The Voices of Children and Young People with Disability Report* (2020) is the first piece of work by ACYP that is dedicated exclusively to the unique lived experiences of this group.

The primary purpose of this work was to ensure that children and young people with disability in NSW had the opportunity to express their voices, opinions and experiences in line with the principle of participation emphasised in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) and ACYP's own legislative mandate.

This report gave children and young people with disability a platform to use their lived experiences to inform decision makers and service providers about how to best continue to support their needs. The report also highlights the ways in which children and young people with disability, who are experts in their own lives, want to be included in the planning and implementation of practical solutions that affect them.

Methodology

Since its creation, the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People has developed a consultation methodology that seeks to facilitate voices of children and young people. Through qualitative data analysis, our aim is to understand what is important to children and young people and identify opportunities to improve current practice. For a consultation dedicated to the voices of children and young people with disability, however, we immediately recognised that our usual practice may not achieve this critical objective.

For some of these consultations many adoptions and changes were made. It was critical that we sought the guidance of those that work in this area and who provide services and support to children and young people with disability. Accordingly, we liaised with schools, disability organisations, parents, carers and children and young people with disability to better understand what they thought needed to be considered before the consultation could take place. This guidance ensured that during our preparation we considered the needs of each individual or group that was participating and tailored each consultation accordingly. Changes included the creation of easy read consent forms, holding consultations in wheelchair accessible buildings, organising furniture in a way that allowed space for support equipment, ensuring the needs of carers during the consultations were considered and pre booking Auslan interpreters for groups that had participants who were deaf or hard of hearing.

As facilitators, the ACYP Participation Team worked hard to ensure that we stayed true to the foundations of the ACYP consultation methodology whilst also ensuring that we made any necessary changes to our typical techniques.

Key Findings

Education in general, and schools or vocational centres in particular, were the focus of much of the consultation discussions. Children and young people reflected on both their successes and their challenges in what was a key part of their everyday experience. The topic of education featured in responses to all questions, suggesting the majority of children and young people regard education as a significant factor in their lives.

Many children and young people spoke about how education was a positive experience for them and told us they valued:

- Schools, teachers and an environment that was dedicated to addressing challenges associated with learning with a disability that offered personal care and one-on-one support when necessary (i.e. Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP's));
- The opportunity to access mainstream schools and classes (Support Units in mainstream schools) and schools that encouraged acceptance of diversity within the student group;
- Participation in school career development, work experience, accredited training and hands on learning in a work environment were among the most important and valuable things children and young people said they learnt at school;
- Work experience and ongoing work placements in areas such as hospitality, farming, national parks, retail outlets, horticulture and cleaning contributed were valued for helping inspire confidence and build employment skills;
- Training and support programs such as vocational skills courses designed specifically for people with disability and similar work and vocational education programs run by organisations such as Northcott, Key Employment, Youth Connection and Macarthur Disability Services (MDS), were highly valued for providing an opportunity to learn new skills, develop self-confidence and self-esteem and prepare participants for future employment;
- The opportunity to learn life skills and skills that could be directly transferred to the “real world” such as shopping, road safety and travel;
- Schools that provided Community Access Courses aimed at helping children and young people with disability feel confident and comfortable in accessing and navigating their community;
- Access to work experience opportunities; and
- Access to extra-curricular activities such as music, art, sport and community programs.

Children and young people told us that they confront the following challenges in the education space:

- Some students felt their education had been negatively impacted by discrimination, and their schools lack of inclusivity and adaptability to their needs;
- Students spoke about their needs not being met and that schools needed to be better supported to, in turn, support student with disability. They specifically mentioned that school buildings and classrooms needed to be adjusted to allow for easier access for children and young people with a physical disability and that more school learning support officers were needed in the classroom, particularly in circumstances where multiple children required intensive support at once;
- There was a lack of opportunity to access training and support programs in their area, leaving them feeling they did not have the skills or qualifications to participate in a workplace;

- Students spoke about the lack of direct consultation with them when decisions were being made about their education, emphasising the importance of speaking to them directly, and not solely to their parents or carers
- Students spoke about health and safety issues such as excessive heat and lack of soap and other sanitary facilities at schools.

Children and young people suggested that an increase in resourcing, disability awareness training for both school staff and students, and buildings that provide for people with physical disability should be considered essential. They also emphasised the importance of ensuring that children and young people, regardless of disability type, have the opportunity to directly participate in decision making in matters impacting them.

Broader Discussion

What is working well?

The Value of Choice

Children and young people spoke about their experiences in Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP's) and mainstream schools. Where children and young people felt their needs were met, both options were spoken of favourably:

One participant explained:

"I went to a school with a support unit so we had lots of people with different disabilities and teachers aids and support teachers to help us, without that in high school it would have been very hard."

A number of young people said they enjoyed being offered the same opportunities to access mainstream school and classes as their peers. A student told us:

"I was able to go to a normal school which was able to give me the other side and I was able to learn about people who did not have a disability and mix I felt like I wasn't disabled as I was the same as another person."

The availability of vocational education opportunities through specialist services such as Northcott, Key Employment and Macarthur Disability were highly valued, with students appreciating having access to life skills education as well as retail, business, landscaping, administration and hospitality training. One young person spoke about the skills they were learning:

"We do personal development, anger management, cover letters, job applications and this helps us."

Another young person spoke about the breadth of opportunities they were able to access through the service they were engaged with:

"We are doing Cert 3 in retail, we can do our Year 12, Rosa certificate, go to TAFE and work experience from here."

The Importance of Teachers and Support Staff

The children and young people who participated in this work talked about how important it was to have supportive, experienced and well-trained teachers and support staff to help them meet their education and personal care needs as well as provide general school life support.

One young person reflected on the importance of feeling that they were active participants in their education:

“Teachers in this school are great, they listen to students.”

Teachers who helped children feel safe, connected and supported were memorable. One young person reflected on the positive impact educators had on him in a previous school:

“My deputy principal and teacher in my old school was awesome he just made learning fun and helped us with all of our problems.”

Another reflected on how much they appreciated having teachers that could communicate with them in Auslan:

“Having teachers in my school who can sign and communicate with us is great.”

Young people at one school described a particularly positive experience with their NDIS Local Area Coordinator (LAC). This Coordinator was also a School Support Learning Officer (SLSO) at the school which meant they could allocate time to help the children and young people with their NDIS application and plans. These students felt that because the teacher had a good relationship with them, and understood their support needs, interests, and abilities, the teacher was able to assist them get access to the funding necessary for them to achieve their goals.

Social Connection

Children and young people spoke about school as a conduit to friendships and connection with their local community. Meeting people and spending time with friends was associated with feeling safe, connected and supported and was repeatedly mentioned as one of the most important things about school. A number of young people connected their school's acceptance and promotion of general diversity in the student group to a feeling of belonging to both their school and community.

One student observed:

“My school is very multicultural and you learn lots about other people and cultures.”

Activities organised by or through the school that connected student to their community via programs such as camps, excursions, volunteering, life skills and community access supports were spoken about positively for helping children and young people develop appropriate social behaviours, understand safety and feel more independent. One student told us:

“We go out in the community catch the bus and train to different places. We learn how to buy things and use public transport.”

Schools that also facilitated opportunities for children and young people with disability to undertake sports (especially swimming), music, drama, woodwork, IT and activities off campus such as work experience, camps and excursions were also highly valued. One young person was excited by the opportunity they had to try different sports:

“We play all sports here football, basketball, soccer and games.”

Facilitating participation

Children and young people said that being involved in school decision making was very important to them. They appreciated the opportunity to be included in meetings where their parents or guardians were speaking to their teachers or support worker about their needs. Other positive examples of participation included being asked their opinion in class and having the opportunity to participate in student council type events. One student told us:

“We have a school SRC (Student Representative Council) group here and they listen to us.”

Children and young people talked about not being asked for their views about school decisions, and not being informed about their options, choices and supports available. One young person talked about attending a Student Support Group meeting where all the adults present were asked questions about the young person rather than asking the young person directly:

“Just because you’re in a support unit does not mean that you don’t have a voice.”

Training and work experience:

Young people identified that participation in school career development, work experience, accredited training and hands on learning in a work environment were among the most important and valuable things they learned at school. Those who were able to access vocational education and employment programs to help them learn new skills and get qualifications said they felt more confident about being able to transition into employment. One young person explained:

“Transition to work program gets you ready and teaches you all the skills that you need for work.”

A number of young people attended ongoing work experience programs during the week. Industries where young people had work placements included: hospitality, farming, national parks, retail outlets, horticulture and cleaning. One young person was proud of the work they did to help others while on work experience:

“We go to work experience in that national park, we learn new skills and help make the parks easier for people and wheelchairs to visit.”

Many young people talked about their desire to obtain a full-time job in the future and the need to have continued support from services in order for them to be successful, safe and supported in the workplace.

Whilst young people with disability who we spoke to highly valued life and vocational skills programs that were made available to people with disability, one young person thought of it as an exception rather than an opportunity that was readily available to their peers:

“Having programs like this, Vocational Skills for people with disabilities, we are very lucky to have that.”

What is not working well?

Bullying

Bullying was a major concern for children and young people. They said it happened at school, on public transport and in the community by other children and young people. Some also reported being bullied by adults. Cyberbullying was also spoken about as a significant issue. They talked about how social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram provided opportunities to share images or negative comments and send threatening messages. Young people believed that bullying could be very harmful, and that it had a negative effect on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. One young person told us intervention to stop bullying was critical to their wellbeing: and another young person told us he was bullied by other students because he was in a special needs unit at a mainstream school:

“Kids bully you because you're disabled or in another unit and I'm kind of really sick of it.”

Children and young people told us that they believed more could be done to stop bullying in schools and that social media platforms need to take more responsibility for what was happening on their platforms. Some children and young people said that removing themselves from social media was helpful in getting away from bullies. Others told us that they just accepted that bullying was a part of their life. One student admitted:

““Bullying and cyberbullying are age old issues that no one seems to have the answer for. It's hard to control things in the schoolyard and even harder on social media but something needs to change. We can't have generations of children who have been bullied all their lives.”

When speaking about how this impacted young people, one student said:

“For the person being bullied it breaks my heart. Makes me feel upset. Makes me feel like I have no friends.”

One young person spoke about an app that their school used to allow them to report bullying anonymously and said that it worked well for them.

The importance of schools and education professionals being inclusive, aware and adaptable

Students described experiencing a broad range of discrimination because of their disability. Children and young people described situations where they felt their individual needs were overlooked or unable to be catered for:

One student explained:

“The school system in general does not cater well for people with disability. It is a one size fits all solution and does not really work.”

One young person expressed frustration that they often felt disempowered, ignored and left out of decision making regarding their own education because the school did not give them a voice or know how to communicate with them appropriately:

“Schools are not inclusive and don’t understand young people with disability.”

One student was severely affected by their difficult school experience and described how it impacted their general wellbeing:

“School was terrible for me. I went to both private and public school... they were absolutely terrible, both students and teachers. It was pretty traumatic.”

Children and young people strongly supported the introduction of disability awareness training for staff and students to improve communication, inclusivity and understanding of different life experiences. One young person suggested that staff and students could be required to undertake a:

“Disability awareness project ... trying to navigate your way around in a wheelchair or in a blindfold so that others can see what it’s like for children and young people with disabilities.”

The need for more targeted supports and specialist assistance

Children and young people described situations where they felt they would have benefited from receiving more support, equipment, or facilities to help them learn and thrive in an educational environment. This was particularly apparent for young people who attended mainstream schools. Many said that they felt there were limited additional classroom supports available to them. Young people mentioned that regularly they would have just one School Support Learning Officer (SLSO) in a class where there were several children and young people who needed intensive support. One young person in a support unit reflected:

“We do not have enough support teachers in this class.”

Participants spoke about having limited input into decisions regarding their education. Some young people spoke about having limited vocational education or TAFE options and wanting to be able to access a broader range of options. One student felt that their opportunity to access higher education was restricted:

“I never had the chance to do HSC and go to University because I was in a support Unit.”

Children and young people, particularly those enrolled in mainstream schools, spoke about the impact that having limited classroom learning supports had on their ability to reach their potential. They recommended that there be more teachers aids so that students can feel comfortable and confident

being in mainstream classes. One young person felt they were overlooked because their disabilities were not understood:

“Teachers never really understood me, so they ignored me.”

Accessibility of school buildings

Concern about the impact of unsuitable school buildings and facilities were raised on a number of occasions. Children and young people recounted instances where classrooms and toilets had limited or no wheelchair access or where their class was held on the third floor, making it difficult for students with physical disability to access. One student with complex health conditions told us

“The stairs are really hard for me and I have to go up and down several times every day.”

Students suggested they would benefit from school buildings being more accessible and wheelchair friendly. A young person who attended a mainstream school said:

“Not having lifts and ramps is hard for me.”

Concerns about the health and safety conditions of school building facilities such as toilets (no toilet paper or soap) and hot classrooms making it harder to learn (no air conditioning) were consistently raised in these consultations, which is reflective of feedback we have received from previous consultations with children and young people.

One young person told us:

“It is difficult to concentrate in my unit, it’s hot and crowded and the windows won’t open.”

What could be done to make NSW a better place for children and young people?

When asked what they would like to change to make NSW a better place for children and young people, participants spoke about the value that increased support, participation opportunities and resources in the education space would provide.

Specialist assistance for schools

Children and young people suggested that schools could utilise the professional support, advice and resources of specialist community and disability services, and work with them to improve the educational experience of students with disability. Children and young people hoped that by doing this, schools could facilitate access to a wider variety of higher educational, vocational and life skills educational opportunities. Creating this kind of partnership could also assist schools to better understand how to involve children and young people with disability in decision making and increase their participation in the wider school community. One young person said they thought there was a need for:

“More support for students with disability in school.”

More resources

Children and young people also suggested increasing the resources available in schools to support students with disability. They particularly suggested increasing the presence of permanent teachers and support staff with qualifications and experience working with children and young people with disability, especially in classes with several children who needed intensive support. One student told us they thought there was a need for more staff to support children and young people with disability at their school:

“We need more teachers here.”

Mental Health

Children and young people thought schools have a role to play in providing mental health education. In particular they thought that believed that schools should do more. Students should learn strategies to support positive mental health and wellbeing in primary school. This young person was relieved that specialist help has started to become available in schools:

“Schools are now getting trained counsellors at last.”

Children and young people said they felt education about mental health, information regarding managing stress and emotions, as well as ways to promote positive mental and normalising conversations about mental health wellbeing should continue through school. One young person reflected on the extreme consequences of not getting help:

“Lots of young people suffer from depression and, as it’s the big cause of death ... it needs to be recognised and addressed.”

Children and young people also supported increased access for school staff and other professionals to access mental health education and ongoing training to understand how to identify and manage children and young people demonstrating signs of mental health problems. Introducing youth mental health first aid and peer to peer training in schools so children and young people can identify danger signs in both themselves and their peers at an early age was also suggested.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback from children and young people during these consultations, ACYP has developed the following recommendations. These recommendations seek to reflect the voices of the children and young people the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People has spoken to during these consultations. Above all, we encourage organisations to reach out to children and young people directly and ensure they directly participate in design and implementation of any service, support, process or plan.

- Increase availability of services that support vocational and educational opportunities for children and young people with disability;
- Increase opportunities for children and young people with disability to be heard from directly on issues relating to their education;
- Increase disability awareness education for students, teachers and other support staff;
- Increase education and training resourcing and support for children and young people with disability, particularly for children and young people attending mainstream schools;
- That the ongoing Department of Education Progress Report on improving outcomes for students with disability feature feedback from children and young people with disability sourced through direct consultations.
- ACYP supports the commitments set out in the NSW Education Disability Strategy (p21-24) to increase availability of disability training for educational professionals and the number of teachers trained to teach special education and support mainstream classroom teachers.
- ACYP supports the commitments set out in the NSW Education Disability Strategy (p29) to increase research promoting an education system that enables children and young people with disability to achieve consistently good outcomes and strongly encourages any research to include consultations with children and young people with disability.
- Consider creating NDIS Youth Specialist Advisor positions that exclusively are dedicated to support children and young people, are partnered with schools or vocational organisations and have specific training in working with children and young people with disability.
- Have NDIS specialists dedicated to children and young people that work with schools and Local Area Coordinators.
- Consider making available to all schools, a harm reporting digital tool (such as an App) that allows children and young people to report bullying and other concerning behaviors anonymously.
- Ensure local mental health services are promoted in schools and other youth organisations.
- Introduce youth mental health first aid and peer to peer training in schools so children and young people can identify danger signs in both themselves and their peers