

Designing Learning Spaces for Diversity, Inclusion and Participation – Pilot Project

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Focus Group Findings: Summary for Participants

Project purpose

The goal of this project was to gain insights from young people with disability, parents/caregivers, disability advocacy organisations and educators (our stakeholders) about what is needed to design schools and learning spaces to ensure all students can participate in learning and school life.

What we did

We held a series of three focus groups with each stakeholder group to explore experiences of inclusive education and what additional knowledge is needed to inform inclusive school design.

Who took part

A total of 35 people took part in the focus groups. The stakeholder groups discussed the questions separate to each other and the analysis was used to bring the data together to understand the varying perspectives.

Stakeholder group	Number (n=35)	Description
Students with disability	5	10 – 17 years of age; conditions included CP, ABI, other physical impairment; living in Vic, WA
Young adults with disability	7	18-30 years; conditions include vision impairment, CP, ADHD, ASD; living in ACT, Vic, NSW
Parents of students with disability	6	Living in QLD, NSW, Vic
DPO	7	ACD, Charge Syndrome Australasia, Physical Disability Council NSW, Heads Together for ABI
Teacher Aides	7	
Educators	3	Principals - special schools

Note: ABI = Acquired brain injury, ACD = Association for Children with a Disability, ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ASD = Autism spectrum disorder; CP = cerebral palsy, DPO = disabled people's organisation representative.

What we asked in each focus group

Three focus groups were each framed by an overarching question. In addition, follow-up questions were also asked of participants. Please see the questions asked below.

Focus Group 1

What does inclusive education mean to you?

- Should all schools welcome all students?
 - What are the benefits of all students attending the same school?
 - Are there benefits to some students attending special schools?
- What has been **your experience** of inclusive education?
 - Have you felt included at school – or witnessed students being included at school?
 - What positive/negative experiences have you had?
- What should inclusive education look like – **in your opinion**?
 - What types of schools are needed to meet the needs of all students?
 - Should all students attend the same type of school?
 - How can the needs of all students be met?

Focus Group 2

What makes it easier or harder to create inclusive learning spaces – inside and outside?

- What has been **your experience** of school facilities?
 - What's worked well?
 - What hasn't worked?
- How could schools be **better designed** to support inclusive education?
 - Access
 - Comfort (acoustics, visual stimuli, temperature etc.)
 - Diverse needs
 - Full participation
- Can all schools be designed to meet the **needs of all students**?
 - Could facility upgrades improve inclusion at more schools?
 - Are different school types needed to cater for the diverse needs of students?

Focus Group 3

What more do we need to know to create inclusive learning spaces?

- How could **user insights** help improve inclusive school design?
- What **future research** is needed to improve the design of inclusive school facilities?
 - What questions do **you** have about how to create inclusive learning spaces?
- **Who** should be involved in future research about the design of inclusive school facilities?

Findings: organised according to themes arising from data gathered across the focus groups

After listening to what was said across the focus groups over the three sessions, we first organised the information in response to the questions asked. Having done that it was clear that there were repeated themes and ideas that had been expressed over time and groups. The summary provided here is the result of the analysis that sought to capture the collective ideas about how best to design schools to be inclusive.

Summary of findings

The aspirations of this work are nicely summarised by one quote from the focus groups:

Diversity is having a seat at the table... Inclusion is having a voice. Acceptance is having that voice heard, and access is empowering people like us to achieve our goals and initiatives. (Participant D - Young adult with disability)

Seven themes were apparent when reviewing the collective summary of findings, and they are organised in relation to each other in Figure 1.

Table 1 (see over page) provides a summary of a) the themes, b) the main ideas comprising the themes, and c) illustrative quotes.

Figure 1. Thematic summary of findings about designing inclusive schools.

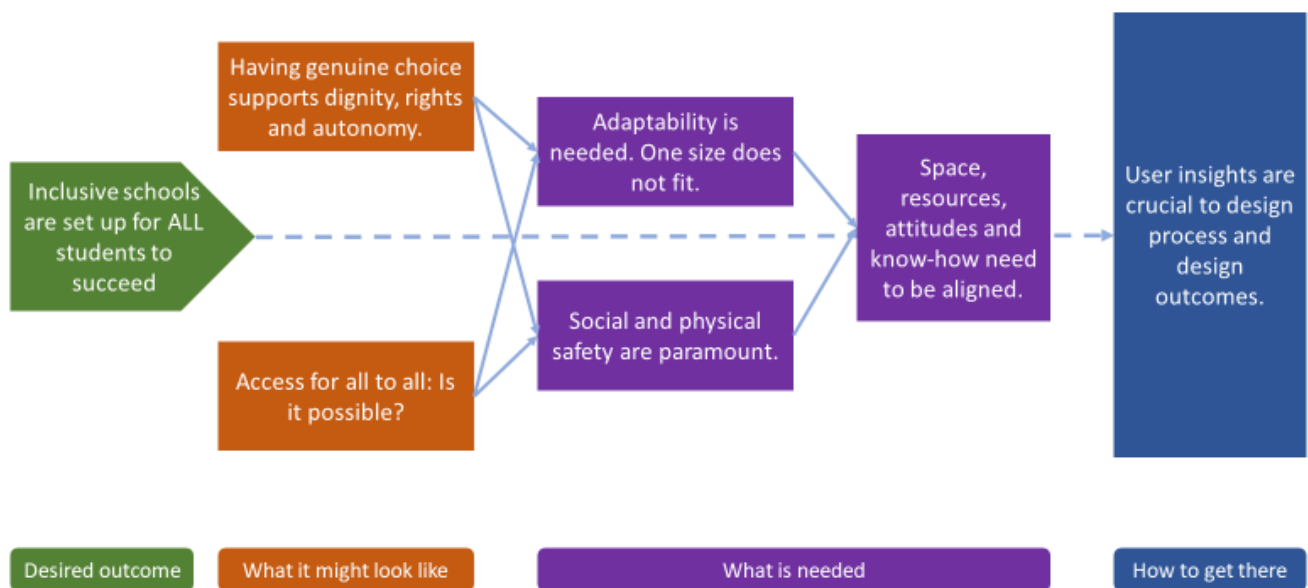


Table 1. Summary of themes, ideas comprising the themes and illustrative quotes.

Theme and statement	Ideas comprising the theme	Illustrative quotes
<p>Inclusive schools are set up for all students to succeed.</p> <p>This means addressing the complexity of diversity and having a whole-of-school approach. Schools that are set up to offer dignity and choice are inclusive.</p>	<p>Schools are welcoming to all students when there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of a range of needs • Students are understood and are not hidden nor invisible • The environment is safe, welcoming, and comfortable • Students and families feel a sense of belonging and acceptance • Sufficient resources are provided to be flexible and student centric. <p>Schools are not inclusive when there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of knowledge and/or skill • When costs prohibit appropriate access / accommodations • When bias, stigma, and negative attitudes towards disability are present or prevail. 	<p>Inclusion really means setting all students up to succeed, to enjoy their education and to have choice in how they participate.</p> <p>- Participant X (DPO)</p> <p>Inclusive education means education where I am able to access the curriculum and the school environment in a way that anyone else would. And I'm not considered as, I guess, being different or being put into something that is different to everyone else.</p> <p>- Participant K (Student with disability)</p> <p>Making sure that it's a very safe space where the children feel it's very welcoming, very comfortable. I think that's a key thing to remember, particularly for children who may not necessarily have a disability but might have a history of trauma.</p> <p>- Participant B (Educator – teaching aid)</p> <p>The only benefit of kids attending special schools is the fact that mainstream schools are inadequately meeting their needs. So, if we can get them up to speed and better fund and better support and better train, then I think the integration of a diverse range of abilities is overall positive.</p> <p>- Participant N (Parents of students with disability)</p> <p>Specialist schools are actually the most inclusive type of education setting available because we allow and include all and have a philosophy that includes all of them and is very child-centred, highly flexible,</p>

	<p>usually relatively well resourced.</p> <p>- Participant R (Educator)</p> <p>It's not accessible if they have to change everything around you and create drama and chaos.</p> <p>- Participant E (Young adults with disability)</p>
<p>Having genuine choice supports dignity, rights, and autonomy.</p> <p>This theme suggests the need for a range of school types – but not based solely on the presence or not of disability.</p>	<p>Being able to choose is closely related to dignity and independence. This issue featured in two ways:</p> <p>First:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to choose the school to attend • Not being forced to 'choose' a particular type of school • Not being denied attendance at a particular school due to resource issues. <p>Second:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having choice within school and learning situations • Being able to control some aspects of the school / learning conditions • Being consulted about needs • Being consulted about how best the space, equipment, and curriculum can be used, adapted, or accommodated to meet individual needs. <p>I don't think that every student needs to attend, needs to be forced to attend the same type of school.</p> <p>- Participant O (Parent of students with disability)</p> <p>We were told we couldn't go to one school because she wouldn't be able to go up the stairs. And then, you know, you don't want to spend ten or twenty thousand dollars [to put them in]</p> <p>- Participant N (Parent of students with disability)</p> <p>There's one new school in Brisbane that I think has a lot of kids. A lot of autistic kids have moved there this year because there's no other choices. These kids would otherwise be forced into home schooling.</p> <p>- Participant O (Parent of students with disability)</p> <p>I wanted to be given that opportunity to choose, and I wish people consulted me on my limitations in play. I wish the teachers came and asked, 'Hey, we're planning this. What can I do to make it accessible?'</p> <p>- Participant I (Students with disability)</p>

Access for all to all – is it possible?

While a prevailing idea was that all schools should welcome all students – in part because *access is empowering* – there was also awareness of practical limitations that may be at play when students have highly specialised needs.

Access is needed to:

- Space
- Equipment
- Specialists.

Access was also discussed in relation to the multiple examples of inadequate design solutions i.e.,

- Steep (or absent) ramps
- Tight /cramped spaces
- Clutter and obstacles
- Entrance ways
- Impact of distance between spaces / classes
- Surfaces
- Heavy doors.

Two particular types of school spaces present serious access and use issues for disabled students:

- Toilets
- Lockers.

Essentially, if the equipment is not right. How are you going to go to a mainstream school?

- Participant L (Student with disability)

Because I had a wheelchair so often, I had to sit down the very extreme edges of the class, and my friends would want to sit at the back, and I couldn't get there.

- Participant H (Young Adults with disabilities)

They don't even consider what type of flooring they use, that if it has any grit for walking aids or for other types of mobility devices.

- Participant E (Young adults with disability)

Proximity makes a huge difference. A lot of our students don't transition well from one space to another. So, you want to have fewer concerns and issues along the way, fewer distractions.

- Participant R (Educator)

In primary school she had a locker or tub. And if hers was up too high or too low, it was awkward. And so, ensuring accessibility and stuff stored around that they use frequently is always within easy reach.

- Participant M (Parent of student with disabilities)

Adaptability is needed. One size does not fit all.

Adaptability of layout, furniture, conditions, and practices are all needed to support quality provision of education. Adaptability goes

Adaptability was identified to relate to:

- Conditions (light, sound, temperature, air quality)
- Space (size, opportunity to

It's been really good in terms of making sure I have the right support and equipment to participate in the learning or in activities at my school to the best of my ability. And I think they've done a great job at modifying things for me.

beyond singular solutions, that is, solving an access or space issue for one student may often create problems for another.

create/access niche areas or varied zones)

- **Furniture and layout**
- **Practices / approaches to curriculum adaptations.**

Being able to choose varied settings and having a sufficient range of potential 'settings' was identified as important.

This theme also relates to the need for flexibility and personalisation – where sufficient knowledge of individual need is required to personalise solutions.

- *Participant K (Student with disability)*

It seems like they're designing it and they're assuming that sort of one size fits all for disability.

- *Participant G (Young adult with disability)*

I think that the invisible architecture in the school, which is the timetable, has the biggest impact on a successful inclusion policy because quite often the timetable is sorted out and [then] everybody has to slot into that.

- *Participant T (DPO)*

Some students that have sensory sensitivities and bright lights, you know, maybe a bit difficult for them when they're learning. So even just having a light that can be dimmed or an area of a room where the lights could be dampened could even help some student

- *Participant G (Young adult with disability)*

I really would love for there to be a more inclusive program for play and sports for those of us with a disability because I've been told because I can't do a sport to just sit out. I need that time with friends running around and exercise and time outside to de-stress just as much as my classmates

- *Participant I (Students with disability)*

We want it to be adaptable enough that you don't have to constantly change the environment around.

- *Participant A (Young adult with disability)*

It caters to one disability, but then is completely inaccessible for a person with another disability.

- Participant A (Young adult with disability)

If you've got physical classrooms that have the option of creating smaller spaces, then that's something that isn't going to require you to rebuild a whole classroom.

- Participant X (DPO)

There are so many sensory experiences in a bathroom, every single sensory experience, there's input everywhere. And without having control (of these), it's been a complete barrier for them to toilet at school.

- Participant G (Educator – teaching aid)

Social and physical safety are paramount.

Risk to social and physical safety impact school choice and student wellbeing.

Three key issues arise in relation to safety:

- **Hazards of the environment that risk falls and other injuries**
- **Spatial arrangements that compromise emotional safety by creating opportunity for bullying and abuse**
- **Emergency arrangements that leave students with mobility impairments behind, due to stairs being the only exit choice.**

When safety is compromised, students are anxious and fearful.

Safety is paramount and that they're not invisible. We've found a lot of the reasons why [child] isn't in school is because it has been unsafe.

- Participant N (Parent of students with disability)

When the concrete gets wet, it gets really slippery, which then makes it dangerous because I sometimes can lose my balance. And also, it also makes me anxious because I fell on concrete last year.

- Participant L (Students with disability)

A lot of disabled students get bullied, and at my high school there were a lot of disabled students who would get abused or bashed in the toilets

- Participant E (Young adults with disability)

Safety was also described in relation to providing support in ways that don't lead to over-protection.

If there isn't the oversight of a teacher or an aide, there is only one point of entry and exit students can kind of get corralled in there. They are places of bullying and places of severe discomfort.

- Participant U (DPO)

... prepare them better for what life is like beyond schooling and to a certain extent that is find that balance between enabling and not mollycoddling, because that can also happen quite a lot in the mainstream setting.

- Participant R (Educator)

Space, resources, attitudes, and know-how need to be aligned.

It's not just about the space. Knowledgeable teachers, specialists, attitudes, need to be integrated through a whole-of-school approach.

Positive experiences of inclusive education were associated with teachers who were knowledgeable and specialists who could be accessed and used.

The prevailing stories, however, were negative, describing:

- A lack of disability awareness across the school
- Spaces and people that don't cater for individual need
- Apparent limited expertise that needs to be shared (across school systems)
- Students need to self-advocate at times when they are not well equipped to do so
- Inadequate resourcing meant teachers were 'trading time' between students with varying needs.

There was a recognition that:

Almost none of our families feel like schools understand their kids. And I think when you don't feel understood, then you don't feel heard. You don't feel respected. You don't necessarily feel valued.

- Participant X (DPO)

Unfortunately for the special schools, form has never followed function and has never really adequately catered for who is in the school as far as students go or the staff supporting them.

- Participant Q (Educator)

Even though they were aware of my vision condition they didn't provide any support. And I was young at that time, and I didn't really fully understand my own disability. So, it was really hard to advocate for what I needed.

- Participant H (Students with disability)

- Inclusive education requires expertise (sometimes highly specialised expertise) to be able to address individual needs
- Educators need and benefit from peer mentoring and supports as well as education/training
- There is a lack of adequate resources.

We say specialisation as something to be celebrated in health, whereas specialisation with education becomes something that is vilified by those who have their own ideology.

- Participant Q (Educator)

I feel like you need to be teaching the teachers or educating them about what you need.

- Participant G (Students with disability)

I think the biggest problem is there's just very little education on disability itself.

- Participant O (Parent of students with disability)

Because we had reasonable funding, we were able to get our O.T. to actually come and do a professional development day with all the teachers at my daughter's school.

- Participant N (Parent of students with disability)

If the teacher has the training, they're able to feel the confidence that they need to be able to let young people choose where in those spaces they best able to learn.

- Participant T (DPO)

User insights are crucial to design process and design outcomes.

Partnership between users and design teams is essential.

There is a crucial need for partnership and deep consultation to understand the diversity of need to:

- Harness the different types of knowledge needed
- Draw on existing expertise in both specialist, mainstream and community settings

There's such a diverse range of needs. So, I think asking as many kids and young people as possible what their favourite spaces are and why and where they feel the safest.

- Participant X (DPO)

We do have challenges, but we wouldn't change our disability because it makes us who we are. We don't see it completely as a negative thing, and we

- Move beyond simple measures of compliance.

This means authentic partnering with:

- Students
- Parents
- Educators
- Therapists
- Disability specialists.

A prevailing frustration exists that consultation does not usually occur or occurs as a 'tick box' exercise. It is hoped that such a situation may dramatically improve.

want people to learn to see it positively rather than negative.

- *Participant L (Student with disability)*

They are training up teachers in what the department deems as inclusive practices, as opposed to utilising the expertise that sits within the specialist settings (to access) systems and strategies that schools ought to be looking at to improve the overall inclusivity of the school, as well as the individualised inclusive practices for each child.

- *Participant R (Educator)*

The main point is, get people who have lived experience to help with the design process.

- *Participant L (Student with disability)*

Where to from here?

The findings from the focus groups reinforce the need for a structured approach to engaging with diverse stakeholders with interests in the creation of inclusive schools. These conversations highlight a need to develop a more detailed understanding of which school spaces work well and under what circumstances, and for whom. We also need a more transparent understanding of the trade-offs that are made when educational design or space-use decisions are made.

As part of this work, a research proposal has been developed to address the following aims:

To provide an evidence-based approach to designing/modifying mainstream schools to be more inclusive by:

- Investigating lived experiences of students with disability and the people around them in school environments to identify barriers to, and enablers of, participation
- Determining the indoor environmental quality (acoustics, lighting, air quality, thermal comfort) requirements of students with disabilities, particularly for those with sensory needs
- Evaluating school facilities to identify what's working/not working for students with disability and opportunities for infrastructure improvement
- Determining means of effectively communicating insights gained to architects and other stakeholders involved in school design.

Another purpose of these focus groups was to build a collaboration of researcher and stakeholder partners to apply for an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant to conduct the detailed research needed to address these aims. An application has been submitted for consideration by the ARC, and includes the following partner organisations:

- Clarke Hopkins Clarke Architects
- Brand Architects
- Billard Leece Partnership (Architects)
- Mott MacDonald Australia
- Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools
- Association for Children with a Disability
- Heads Together for ABI
- Modern Star
- Department of Education and Training (Victoria)
- Department for Education (South Australia)
- Department of Education (Queensland)

If you would like to be informed about the progress of the research, and / or be involved in some way, please let us know by contacting A/Prof Ben Cleveland at benjamin.cleveland@unimelb.edu.au.