



Held back: the experience of students with disabilities in Victorian schools

> what educators told us

This factsheet explains what educators told us about of working with students with disabilities in Victoria.

Who got involved?

More than 900 educators took part in our research, by completing a survey, attending a 'have a say' day, contacting us through our phone-in, or submitting a case study. Most educators (883) participated through our survey.

These educators had varying backgrounds and degrees of experience. Most were classroom teachers (399), followed by teacher aides (185) and principals (105). Most were very experienced, with 43 per cent having more than 20 years experience.

Almost all of these educators (96 per cent) were from government schools, with almost three quarters (639) working in government mainstream schools and 205 (23.4 per cent) working in government specialist schools.

What did educators tell us?

The Commission had heard about students with disabilities completing distance-education or home-schooling. The Commission had also heard of students attending school part-time, even though full-time attendance is compulsory in Victoria. To test this, we asked educators for their observations of the frequency of different patterns of attendance.

- Most educators described part-time attendance as rare (42 per cent) or occasional (37 per cent).
- Most educators described home-schooling as rare (62.3 per cent) or occasional (12.8 per cent).
- Just over half thought that distance education of students with disabilities was rare, but almost 40 per cent answered that they did not know.

Barriers to participation

Seventy-three per cent of educators told us that students with disabilities are able to participate at school on the same basis as other students.

Some educators told us that lack of time, training, teacher aides, resources and funding affected their ability to facilitate full participation. Others stated that the nature of some children's disabilities meant that they were unable to participate on an equal basis.

Providing adjustments for students with disabilities

Two thirds of educators told us that adjustments were made for all students with disabilities at their school. One in five educators said that this was not the case.

Many educators told us that the adjustments they made were effective at matching the learning support needs of students (41 per cent), others thought this was the case 'sometimes' (46 per cent). Nine per cent of educators thought that adjustments were not effective.

Sixty-three per cent of educators told us there are particular forms of disability that their school finds more difficult to accommodate. Educators nominated behavioural related disabilities (297 educators), autism spectrum disorder (204 educators), physical disabilities (150 educators) and mental health disabilities (123 educators).

Communicating with parents

Eighty-seven per cent of educators reported that they consulted with parents and students with disabilities on adjustments to accommodate the specific needs of the student. Almost all said parents are involved in reviewing adjustments.

Training and support for teachers

Over half of educators said they do not feel they have received adequate training and support as a teacher of students with disabilities. Looking at the results by role, 46 per cent of principals, 38 per cent of classroom teachers, 59 per cent of aides, and 64 per cent of specialist support providers answered that they did not have enough training or support.

Forty per cent of educators told us that they were not aware of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, which set out their obligations under anti-discrimination law.

Use of restraint and seclusion

Around 60 per cent of educators told us that they had physically restrained a student at school during their career. Of these, just over half (56 per cent) said they did not have adequate training to manage the situation.

Many educators described circumstances where they had to quickly grab a child to prevent them from harm, but a few described situations where restraint was used as a behaviour management technique.

Suspension and expulsion

Most educators (60 per cent) told us that suspension of students with disabilities is rare. Seventy-eight per cent said that expulsion is rare. However, a significant number (239) reported that suspension is occasional (27.7 per cent) or common (7.2 per cent). This pattern was broadly similar across educators from all school sectors.

Bullying and harassment

Fifty-six per cent of educators told us that they had witnessed bullying or harassment of students with disabilities. Educators most commonly reported witnessing students with disabilities being verbally abused (425 educators), ignored or shunned (343 educators) or physically assaulted (201 educators).

Educators were generally positive about how their school responded to bullying.

Ninety-seven per cent reported that their school had policies in place to address bullying and harassment. Educators told us that their schools used behaviour management plans, general teaching about appropriate behaviour, role-plays, social stories, counselling and restorative justice programs to manage bullying. Only a few educators felt that their school did not manage bullying well.

Discrimination and complaints

Almost one in four educators said that they had witnessed discrimination at their school. Educators identified a range of examples, including exclusion of students with disabilities from camps, excursions, sports events or particular classes; inappropriate behaviour management; showing audiovisual material without captions; and a failure to provide or work well with support staff, such as interpreters and integration aides.

... it is usually due to ignorance, lack of time to consider the options rather than a teacher or school wanting to discriminate.

Half of the educators we surveyed thought that there had been no discrimination complaints raised at their school in the last year. Forty-one per cent did not know, and 7 per cent told us there had been between one and five complaints of discrimination at their school in the last year.

What do teachers want?

Based on the results of this survey, many educators want:

- more funding and resources to make the adjustments that students need
- training and professional development to feel confident teaching students with disabilities
- collaborative and supportive relationships with other professionals and with parents
- safe and positive learning environments
- strong leadership within their school.

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