## Education and learning

People with intellectual disability reported common experiences in education and learning. In mainstream schools, they were often bullied. In special schools, they often received sub-standard educations. And they were practically excluded from accessing tertiary education.

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| Ted, 56, went to a mainstream school in a regional area.  ‘I did get picked on a little bit,’ he said.  The other students teased Ted, calling him ‘Goo-Goo Gaga’ because he spoke differently. He said that the worst of the teasing stopped after his teacher intervened in grade 4.  When Ted was in year 7, a teacher encouraged him to write a novel about his outback travels with his father, while the mothers of students spent time helping teach students in the remedial school classes.  Ted now lives independently, holds down a job and has had a driver’s licence for almost 40 years, but struggles with reading.  He said that the NDIS should allow participants to use their funding to buy educational software and apps that help bridge gaps on their literacy and numeracy. |

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| Wayne, in his 50s, went to a special school. His three children went to mainstream schools.  He said his children were teased at school, but school staff intervened and stopped the teasing as soon as he raised the issue. Most of his negative experience came from interacting with other parents.  Wayne said:  ‘Some of the parents are nice, some are mean, and they don’t talk to you. I think it’s important for them to talk to you as a parent. They’ve got kids, I’ve got kids. … The attitudes of people need to change.’ |

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| Donna is in her 50s.  She said she was frequently bullied in school and had to be walked home from the bus stop by a friend. ‘She used to have to walk me home from my bus stop because the kids from the primary school and the high school used to pick on me,’ she said.  Donna said:  ‘I did not learn anything in the special school. I’ve taught myself how to read and write. I have a dictionary. I write up words from the dictionary and learn how to do things like that.’ |

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| Nick, 32, lives and works independently despite his sub-standard education.  He said:  ‘I was at special school. I went out of there when I was 18. I couldn't write. I couldn’t read. It’s quite an amazing thing because, like, when I went to a special school, they had a lot more focus on … it was somewhere to go for people. They didn’t actually teach us maths or life skills, if you know what I mean, and … we didn’t have years like from, say, grade one to, say, grade 12. Basically, they said, “Well, you’ll go to day service or a sheltered workshop. And that’s it.”’  Nick said:  ‘Many people with disabilities never get the opportunity to go to tertiary education because they are not supported, or even told that university or TAFE is an option. They’re very smart, but because they don't have the knowledge around where to go … they’re not told about disability liaison units, they’re not told about, you know, you can get us a full support in the actual university. They’re not told this stuff, so when they do, if they do want to go to university, they look and go, “It's too hard.” … It is just not an encouraging environment for people with disabilities.’ |

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| Calum, 22, said his maths went backwards after he was sent to a special school as a teenager.  ‘They would give me baby work,’ he said.  Calum wanted help to become a cabinet maker but didn’t receive support at school and became frustrated and angry.  He said:  ‘They [the school] just used me for my funding for the money and they treated me badly in high school and really did not listen.’  Calum said he wanted to study social work at TAFE but had been told he could only access the course online, without support.  He said he was discouraged: ‘I do need somebody there with me.’ |

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| Penny, in her late 30s, works in open employment and lives independently. She was educated in an institution until the age of 7.  She said:  ‘When I came out, I couldn’t read or write, and my parents decided to place me into a mainstream school. Now, I was very lucky that I had a teacher’s aide. She was only funded to work with me for five hours a week, but she worked with me five days a week, unpaid, and I believe that’s the only reason why I can read or write. There’s not enough funding given to aides in schools. … if I didn’t have that I wouldn’t be where I am today.’  Penny said she experienced verbal and physical bullying ‘all the time’ when she moved into a mainstream high school and received minimal support from teachers. She was placed in a segregated class set up to handle disruptive students. The class was so bad, she said, the teachers’ aides refused to take her to the classroom and kept her in their office. She said the school only took action when she was 16 and threatened to drop out.  ‘If you don’t have someone who’s very vocal on your side you kind of get left out and subjected to lots of horrible stuff,’ she said.  Penny said she was lucky that her parents were pushy:  ‘When I was about 17 … there was another guy whose cerebral palsy was exactly the same as mine, probably not even as bad as mine. His mum sent him to a mainstream school, but he didn’t get as much support, so he ended up going to [a special school]. He was in Year 12. I was in Year 11. He couldn’t write as well as me. He could walk better. Couldn’t read. … He goes to day services [now]. He doesn’t have what I have, which he could’ve if his parents had pushed as hard as mine did and if he’d had as many opportunities as I had.’ |

Families said that they were often made to feel unwelcome — and discriminated against — in mainstream schools.

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| Ron and Pam wanted to send their daughter, Miranda, to mainstream school.  Miranda, who had Down syndrome, had already attended a mainstream kindergarten — once Ron agreed to attend alongside his daughter and act as a volunteer aide.  In Adelaide, they found a supportive mainstream primary school with a welcoming Prep teacher. Miranda did well during her first year at primary school, learning to read and write, but things changed when she had a different teacher for grade 1. The new teacher didn’t want Miranda in her class. Halfway through the year she was expelled from her mainstream school.  ‘The special school wasn’t quite stimulating enough,’ Ron said.  After that, Miranda went to a special school, but – despite her record as a quick learner – her reading never improved. She dropped out of school and started working in a sheltered workshop at just 15.  Miranda quickly became bored at the sheltered workshop, but never returned to school.  ‘It’s not what you want,’ Pam said of her daughter’s time in the sheltered workshop. ‘She should have stayed at school longer.’ |

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| Wendy sent her daughter Kate — now in her 20s — to the only private secondary school that accepted her after she was bullied in primary school.  She said:  ‘I was told at the primary school not to send her to the local high school because she wouldn't survive. … And you know what the problem is with the special school system is that I just don't think that they do enough [educating]. … You need to be able to read and write to the best of your ability for you to be able to make it in society, and I don't know if that's what she would have got at a special school. … In terms of choice for children with a disability they really do need to ensure that there's more choices.’  At the private secondary school, Wendy said the staff behaved as though they were doing ‘a big favour’ by letting Kate attend.  She said:  ‘We were told when we went to the school that they would only keep her if they were absolutely assured of our commitment as parents to … make sure that we supported the school at all steps of the way. So, I just felt that we had a bigger burden placed on us as parents, too, and really had no rights in relation to schooling. It was at the whim of the education provider. … We were once told that they didn't think we were making enough of a commitment and that they might have to decide not to keep her on because of the resources that she was using.’  Wendy said the students at the school, which was a Christian college, were ‘really good’ to Kate. The deputy principal was not.  ‘On the last day of school,’ she said, ’I was speaking to the deputy principal and I said to him, “Look, I'm very grateful for what you did in taking [my daughter] on and bringing her through this school,” and whatever. And then he turned around and he said to me, “Had we known how difficult it was going to be, we wouldn't have accepted her.” I was absolutely shattered.’ |

Advocates said that the educational system failed students with disabilities in mainstream and special schools — and excluded them in tertiary education.

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| One advocate with expertise in education, Lisa, said:  ‘We are absolutely not doing our duty as educators. I think it is criminal … that young children are starting school without robust communication systems. No child should start school without a robust communication system in place. Our system has completely failed if that is happening. … The use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication does not hinder speech development. In fact, there is evidence that AAC can accelerate speech development. …  ‘Teachers and therapists are not taught how to teach people with disabilities – let alone communicate with them. Education departments have an attitude towards communication that it’s not their job, it’s the task of the speech therapist. But communication is fundamental to teaching. …  ‘I am consistently frustrated by education departments that don’t recognise that having their teachers understand how communication systems work is absolutely paramount to the success of kids’ learning, because if they cannot communicate with them and they can’t communicate to them they absolutely cannot demonstrate their learning.’  Lisa said she was also frustrated that schools neglected their responsibility to teach people with disabilities and instead — in mainstream and special schools — focused on functional skills.  ‘There’s nothing more functional in life than communication skills and literacy skills,’ she said.  She said educators took a passive approach to people with disabilities – waiting and seeing whether they developed speech and communication skills on their own before teaching them more skills when they should be immersing students in other forms of communication. She said an over-reliance on Applied Behaviour Analysis for kids with autism was a mistake when the feedback from many adults with autism was that ABA was ‘tantamount to abuse for people with autism’.  Lisa said:  ‘It’s not about teaching someone to say what you want them to say. That’s not communication. Communication is supporting someone to say what they want to say, when they want to say it, to whoever they want to say it, however they want to say it. Not on demand. … I am really worried that we are setting up kids who … are already more at risk of physical and sexual abuse than any other category of child. They already have minimal communication, which puts them more at risk because they cannot report it, and yet we put them at risk further by not giving them access to words like “no”, “stop”. … That’s my biggest concern, that we are setting kids up for more abuse because we are not giving them the opportunity to have power language.’  Lisa was also alarmed by the tendency in special schools to ‘lump together’ students with complex needs — who often range in age from 4 to 17 — in the same class and referred to as the ‘wheelie class’ or the ’multi class’.  She said:  ‘When I’ve questioned principals on that … they’ve said, “Oh, well, that’s what the parents call them.” They are literally lumping kids together where it doesn’t matter, “That one’s four and one’s 17, they can all be in the same class.” I mean that’s just ridiculous. …  ‘There is nothing special about special schools. Because it’s not special education. It’s segregated education. … We’ve got decades worth of evidence now that says kids do better in mainstream school even if it’s dire. Even if it’s a terrible experience they’re tending to do better. … That’s because … they are still in an environment where they are surrounded by rich, age-appropriate language models … [and] they’ve got access to the curriculum.’  Finally, Lisa said that instead of quarantining students with disabilities with teacher’s aides they should be placed with the most talented teachers:  ‘Our kids who have the most difficulty learning are being taught by the people that have the least training and the least experience.’ |

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| Vicky has worked in mainstream and special schools.  She said special school channelled people with disabilities into a lifetime of segregation. Specialist settings were, she said, babysitting services rather than educational services:  ‘If all children went to mainstream schools and there wasn't one curriculum for all, everyone learns at their own abilities, they’d have grown up with diversity … they’d just be accepted in society’ |

## Case Study: The self-educated self-advocate

This is the story of how a special school failed to prepare a young man with a disability for the world beyond the school gate — so he prepared himself.

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| Nick is 32.  He was illiterate when he left special school at 18.  Before leaving school, a teacher asked Nick what he wanted to do after graduation. He said he wanted to work as a public speaker and a self-advocate.  Nick said:  ‘Basically, my teacher said, they looked at me and go, “Too-hard basket.” That’s a direct quote, that is. She goes, “Look. I’m going to be completely honest with you. You’re probably going to be in a CRU [community residential unit] and in a sheltered workshop or a day service.” … That was my first career advice.’  Nick was sent to a day service after graduation — his options were limited.  He said:  ‘I went to a day service for five years and one of the things I wanted to learn was how to read and they said, “Oh, we’ll just put him in a creating-a-newsletter program. He can learn that way.” And I said, “No. I would like to learn how to read properly. You know, *read* and *spell*. And they go, “Too hard.” … I was expected to stay there forever basically, and I said, “No, I’m not doing that. You know, I’m going out there and getting a job and doing what I need to do to survive.”’  Nick left the day service. When he started working at an advocacy agency, he was sent to literacy classes and taught to read and write. He is now a public speaker and self-advocate.  Recently, Nick returned to his special school for a reunion. He met the teacher who told him he belonged in a sheltered workshop.  Nick recalled the conversation:  ‘I said, “You know what I do for work now?” I said, “I do exactly what you told me I couldn't do.” And I wasn't being nasty about it, I said, “You need to encourage people a little bit more.” She goes, “Oh, sorry.”’ |