

5. Students in education support centres and students with disability

The sample

Twenty-one students attending Year 3 to Year 12 at an education support centre participated in the survey. The students came from four government-run education support centres, one of which was in a regional area.^{133 134}

The students at education support centres completed an amended version of the school and learning survey. They used either hand-held electronic devices or desktop computers and some were assisted by teaching staff or a CCYP staff member.

Due to the small sample size of this survey (21), the discussion of findings will be descriptive and focus on outlining trends. Where comparison between students at education support centres and students at mainstream schools will be undertaken, it will be done using broad proportions only.

In addition to the discussion of the responses from students in education support centres, the responses from 46 students who were part of the Year 7 to Year 12 main sample and who reported having disability will also be discussed.¹³⁵

The views of students from mainstream schools regarding the intersection of health, disability and engagement with school and learning are discussed in Chapter 4.8 – Feeling physically and mentally well. The views were expressed through the group discussions and therefore students may or may not have identified as having a disability or long-term health condition. Through some of the responses it was clear students were referring to friends and other students and advocating for support.

Student profile

One-quarter of participating students in education support centres were born outside of Australia and reported that their parents spoke a language other than English at home.

No Aboriginal students attending an education support centre participated in the survey.

All participating students in education support centres had attended more than one primary or high school and more than one-half of them had attended three schools or more.

Students' health

All participating students in education support centres described their health as 'good' or better, and more than three-quarters said their health was 'very good' or 'excellent'. This is significant as it highlights that students with disability do not necessarily perceive their disability in terms of the impact it does or does not have on their health, or that their disability is linked with 'good' or 'poor' health outcomes.

The students reported a range of activities that they had difficulty with or could not do on account of their disability or long-term health condition. The most commonly mentioned activities that were impacted were 'doing school work in class' – more than one-half of students mentioned this – and 'sports'.

Liking school

When asked how they feel about school, one-half of students reported liking school 'a lot'. The other half of students answered that they like school 'a bit' or think 'it is OK'. One student reported not liking school.

Participating students at education support centres described a range of activities and things that they like about school. The most commonly mentioned activities were:

- seeing my friends (mentioned by three-quarters of respondents)
- sports (mentioned by three-quarters of respondents)
- learning new things (mentioned by one-half of respondents).

These three most commonly mentioned activities that students like about school are the same that were mentioned by students in mainstream schools.

Positive relationships with peers, teachers and family

Most participating students in education support centres (three-quarters) reported feeling that the teachers care ‘a lot’ about them. The remainder felt that teachers care ‘some’ and one student felt that teachers do not care about her/him.

In regard to receiving help for their school work, most students (more than two-thirds) answered that they ‘always’ get the help they need. The remainder of students answered that they ‘sometimes’ get help and one student said ‘not at all’.

When asked about relationships with other students, three-quarters of participating students reported getting along with the kids in their class ‘most of the time’. The remainder answered that they get along ‘sometimes’ and one student said that he/she does not get along with the kids in his/her class.

All students answered in the affirmative when asked whether their family says it is important they go to school every day.

Families were described as being engaged with their child’s school with nearly all students saying that their parents meet with the teacher, come to school activities, and also one-third saying that their parents help in class or at school. Most students also said that their family asks about their school work.

Safety and attendance

All participants said it was important to them to be at school every day with three-quarters saying it is ‘very important’ to them. Most students also reported being worried when they miss school but some said they were not.

In regard to safety, while nearly all students reported feeling safe either ‘all the time’ or ‘most of the time’, two students reported not feeling safe. In addition, more than one-half of students reported being afraid that someone will hurt or bully them at school either ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’.

Bullying was the most commonly mentioned topic when students were asked what they would change if they could change one thing about their school. Seven students made a comment relating to bullying with other comments relating to more freedom or students saying they would not want to change anything.

“People who are bullies not to be at my school.”

“Bullying stop.”

“Do anything we want.”

“I would like to keep my school same like always.”

Overall, students attending school at an education support centre who participated in the survey presented positive attitudes and ideas about school and learning that were comparable and, at times, more favourable than those of students attending a mainstream school.

The participating students in education support centres provide a positive example of how students with disability who are well supported and show positive attitudes and thoughts about school and learning can achieve the same engagement outcomes as their peers.

When considered in more detail, three areas were found to stand out by trending more negatively for participating students in education support centres in comparison with students in the mainstream sample and these are:

- an increased likelihood to have changed schools more than once
- an increased likelihood of experiencing difficulties with a range of activities on account of their disability or long-term health condition
- an increased likelihood to feel concerned or worried about being hurt or bullied at school.

For all other topic areas the trends that were found for students in education support centres were comparable if not trending more positively than those described for students in the mainstream sample: students in education support centres exhibited a similar if not greater level of enjoyment of school (more than one-half of students in education support centres said they like school a lot), assigned equal or greater importance to being at school every day and listed the same top activities that they felt were most enjoyable about school.

As with students in mainstream schools, the majority of students in education support centres felt that teachers care about them, that mostly they receive the help they need to do their school work (the trend for students in education support centres was that they were more likely than students in mainstream schools to say they get the help they need) and that they get along well with the peers in their class.

Families were described as being engaged with their child's school and as assigning great importance to their child's daily attendance at school.

Students with disability in mainstream schools

Aside from the 21 students attending an education support centre, 46 students with disability who were attending Year 7 to Year 12 in a mainstream school also participated in the survey.

A number of areas were found to stand out for students with disability compared to students without disability (all part of the main sample). These were an increased likelihood to:

- have changed schools at least once
- have a long-term health problem or condition in addition to a disability
- experience difficulties with a range of activities on account of their disability or long-term health condition
- have difficulties with concentration, behaviour, feelings or being able to get along with people.

In addition, 17 per cent of surveyed students who had a disability were Aboriginal.

These factors compound students' vulnerability and disadvantage and are supported by the literature, much of which describes children and young people with disability experiencing poorer health, educational and employment outcomes compared to their peers without disability.^{136 137}

In terms of attitudes and thoughts about school and learning, there was little difference between students with and without disability in mainstream schools. The trends in the following areas can be described as positive and are comparable for both groups of students:

- most students like school (a lot or a bit)
- most students feel that teachers care about them and treat them fairly
- most students usually get along with their teachers
- most students usually get the help they need
- most students get along with their peers (slight trend for students with disability to be more likely not to disclose this information ('prefer not to say'))
- most students feel it is important to be at school every day (slight trend for students with disability to be more likely to find this 'somewhat important' and less likely to find it 'very important')
- most students find what they are learning very valuable.

Finally, comparison between students with and without disability in mainstream schools has shown students with disability were more likely to:

- have waggged school for a full day at least once in the school year
- have been suspended at least once (increased likelihood for both school suspension and in-school suspension)
- feel unsafe at school or worried about bullying
- not have gone to school at least once for fear of being hurt or bullied.

In summary, students with disability in mainstream schools reported a range of problems that have the potential to impact negatively on their school experience and making them more prone to vulnerability and disadvantage.

Despite their predisposition to increased vulnerability however students with disability described similarly positive attitudes towards school and learning as students without disability. For instance:

- Students with disability who are well supported either in mainstream or education support have positive experiences with school and learning.
- Students with disability who are well supported either in mainstream or education support can and will work towards reaching their potential.