

The Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools.

My name is Melinda Oogjes. I am a Peer Connector at the Association for Children with Disability Tasmania (ACD Tas). I co-ordinate the Youth Empowering Peers (YEP) and Empowered Me programs, statewide.

YEP is a grassroots leadership training course, open to youth with disability between the ages of 14-25. We meet fortnightly in school terms, and the group is limited to a maximum of 10 participants.

Empowered Me (EM) is an individual program that assists youth with disability to articulate their values, strengths, goals, and accommodations. EM has also been piloted in two schools in Southern Tasmania.

Both programs employ Youth Connectors, young people with disability, to co-facilitate each session.

YEP leaders take part in youth networks across the state, are introduced to various community and government leaders and decision makers, and mentored to engage in civic feedback mechanisms, and practice civic participation and self-advocacy skills. Opportunities to *have a say* have always been embraced by each group and the alumni.

Most network members have said that they have experienced bullying and/ or less favourable treatment within education as a result of exclusion, abuse, unmet access needs and/or lack of opportunity.

The discrimination and bullying described typically started at an early age with members reported feeling that the educational system had always failed to respond to their needs in some ways, for example, a lack of adequate in and out of classroom supports and / or assistive technology to enable participation.

Overwhelmingly, members have expressed their experiences of bullying or less favourable treatment at school as previously limiting their social and civic participation, and conversely being the driving force for their desire to make the YEP program a safe and inclusive space for youth with disability to connect, learn and develop.

After careful consultation, I am contributing to the inquiry with the assistance of two ACD Tas Youth Connectors and using reflections from the past 4 years of working in the ACD Tas YEP network. Britt Wilson and Nicole McKillop (Youth Connectors) have provided personal reflections from their school experiences. Members within the network are between the ages of 15-24 and some are still attending school.

Determine the impact of discrimination and bullying on:

Student participation

The YEP program generally receives young people who are full of potential but face significant barriers to further education, employment, and civic participation. I have observed that their experiences of bullying and discrimination in the education system have contributed to a belief that they are *less than* their peers.

Over the four years, youth network members have said:

- their contributions in class were/are rare for fear of humiliation, or not being given adequate accommodations to do so
- they experienced very limited peer socialisation in breaks or after school
- they had patchy participation in student clubs, councils, or sporting groups

The impacts from school experiences on individual members is far-reaching, with many of the young people in the network starting because they are lonely and socially isolated, experience anxiety and depression, and are struggling to gain employment and participate in the community.

The consequences for civic society are therefore significant, as we are missing out on the important contribution from young people who have so much to give but lack the confidence or experience to do so. Active citizenship is something that the ACD Tas youth network seeks to encourage, support, and mentor.

Some examples:

During school break times, students have reported feeling like loners, being isolated, and retreating to safe zones (like segregated learning support areas), and hanging out with Teacher Aids or safe teachers and not with peers for fear of further harassment or rejection.

Some people made their own safe zones, away from bullying and discrimination by forming or joining clubs at school. Others did not feel they could, through fear of further ridicule about the group they chose (for example LGBTIAQ+ or gaming groups) or rejection if they did join.

One YEP member joined the SRC but found it difficult to attend meetings because their access needs were not met. They noted that the irony was that they were elected to address access issues within the school.

Many members were unable to articulate their needed accommodations to teachers or peers. Sometimes the consequence of not having their needs met looking like disruptive behaviour, inability to follow instructions or not paying attention. Disconnection with the rest of the class led to less engagement with learning, exacerbated isolation, low self-esteem, and entrenched a belief in many that as students they had little of value to contribute. This belief once embraced by the person and their fellow students, meant that speaking up in class was unsafe.

This marginalization in the classroom, isolation at break times and spending time with teaching staff (not peers) meant most members reported the YEP network at ACD Tas as their only social or learning opportunity outside school hours. Extra-curricular opportunities, play dates, or social catchups have been reported as very rare.

Online gaming is the exception for those with connectivity and adequate literacy, although YEP members, particularly in the NW, reported barriers. While this can be very positive, it can also lead to unsafe situations for vulnerable youth desperate for connection.

One member said they had no participation with peers in school; they were homeschooled after a traumatic time in state education.

Members have said they were pulled out of class without an explanation or were not given a choice about electives. One member said they had to do Braille for their language. She was the only person in that class, further isolating her.

Staying in school and educational outcomes

According to the experiences of many of the YEP members, bullying and discrimination (both personal and systemic) contributed to their low attendance and a failure to complete compulsory education.

One in six YEP participants did not finish year 12.

Several who did finish did not receive TCEs or ATARs.

Youth have reported being home schooled or moving schools due to bullying and discrimination. Of the youths who changed schools due to bullying, some did not attend for several months at a time.

One member was bullied during school hours and then stalked online and cyber-bullied by peers. They did not attend for most of year 8, and still experience significant social anxiety as a result.

Youth Network members had a better time in college in that they reported less bullying and feeling more respected. They said that teachers took more time to understand their access needs, and particularly those who are neurodivergent.

Fear of disclosure (bullying/ discrimination due to disability) in tertiary education or employment has been reported as leading to either not applying, or poor outcomes.

Recommendations:

Change the culture within schools through:

- More people with disability in schools - visitors, mentors, staff
- Targeted training for teachers
- More opportunities for Peer groups within schools and at break times
- Ensuring Disability Rights are taught within the curriculum, and framed within the civil rights movement.

Please contact me if you would like me to speak to this submission.

Signed: Melinda Oogjes, August 30, 2024

Peer Connector- Youth Network

The Association for Children with Disability (Tasmania) Inc.

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools. My name is Brittney Wilson.

I am 23 years old and live with a physical disability (I am a wheelchair user) and ADHD. I work at ACD Tas as a Youth Connector. I presented at the Disability Royal Commission in Hearing 24 and have attended the School Reform meeting with CYDA. I am passionate about contributing to systemic change for all people with disability, and even those without. Bullying affects everyone.

Determine the impact of discrimination and bullying on:

Student participation (e.g. Did bullying or discrimination impact the way you participated in class, during lunchtime, in after-school activities or student representative groups for example).

Yes, during Primary I felt extremely singled out by teaching staff – and I believe this had a huge impact on the way I was then treated by my fellow peers as I aged. This led me to have anxiety of how I was perceived and impacted me making connections in both High School and College (years 11 & 12).

I had instances where I was:

- pulled out of class for unnecessary activities (such as group fine motor, that the school was told was not needed due to my therapies outside of school by both parents and my therapists). This drew attention to me and impacted me settling back into the classroom – as well as making me fall behind in my learning due to missing class activities.

- I was given unnecessary assistive technology, such as text to speech due to the fact my teachers felt I was too 'slow'. This caused students to look at me funny, disengage from me and made me feel too embarrassed to use the device.
- I was not given dignity of risk and forced to utilize my therapies and mobility devices too extensively ('skin suit'/'second skin' and walker that was only intended to use when tired), despite therapist intervention and the fact I could mobilize myself without these and did so regularly and safely outside of school. This caused me physical harm (pressure sores from too much use, etc.) and made me unable to play or keep up with my peers during breaks.
- I was labelled rude, disrespectful and unruly when speaking up and attempting to advocate for my needs by teacher assistants, teachers and even the principal – regularly having meetings where I felt unsafe with a large number of staff telling me this, without a parent or support person present.
- Teacher Assistants erased my work if they believed I got something wrong, and then re-did it for me rather than assisting me to learn. There was one instance where I was very proud of myself for getting a math problem correct, only for my TA to insist I had not. As I was confident in my answer, I went to a friend (who was top of our class) to find I had gotten the same answer as him. He congratulated me, as he knew my struggles with math, but the TA insisted that we were both incorrect still until the teacher came over and corrected the TA. I got in 'trouble' from the TA for being rude and 'smug' when I smiled at myself and did a happy dance, with a teasing 'I told you so' – I was 12.
- Every time I needed the bathroom out of the set times the TAs were allocated, I was met with frustration and made feel like a burden as they rolled their eyes at me (I was not allowed to use the bathroom independently due to HOS policies, and they required two staff to be present).
- Students' attitudes towards me changed as these instances became more common, and my disability was more singled out – and I began getting bullied for my differences. Rather than changing the students' attitudes, pushing my manual chair to and from school activities became a punishment for students who had 'misbehaved'. There was an instance where the teacher had just walked off and left, allowing the 'troubled' student to wheel me unsupervised and he decided to make it a game of pretending to crash me into things, or making my chair do 'wheelies'

without my consent – thankfully I had a close friend who had refused to leave my side and advocated for me, ensuring I was safe.

- When I became fully wheelchair bound, teacher assistants would arrive late to shift to assist me to play with friends or refuse to keep up with them and chat with other staff – I was again labelled ‘rude’ for interrupting conversations and asking if we can ‘finally go’. Sometimes whole recesses and lunches were taken up by these conversations and I would get no chances to interact with my peers during my breaks. Telling my few friends that they had to go play without me so they didn’t miss out too.
- And there is so much more...

These interactions and instances so early, heavily impacted my own sense of self and caused me to have a strong distrust of teachers and teacher assistants.

It also caused me to have severe anxiety over the way I presented and conducted myself, to not be again labelled as ‘disrespectful’ – as I was raised strictly to have manners and respect was a huge value for my family, it was one of my greatest fears to disappoint anyone. This made me become a heavy people-pleaser, with no regard for my own boundaries.

I did not know how to make healthy friendships going into high school and college and did not want to present as ‘disabled’ (refusing the assistive devices that could have potentially made my life easier, and support from TA’s, refusing to enter segregated disability spaces within schools until the bullying and isolation in high school became unbearable, etc.). It has taken me a long time, and a lot of support, to undo the internalized ablism the school institutions instilled in me.

I spent my high school years mostly in the library or courtyards with my head in a book, in the Big Picture Program classrooms, or at home. The few friends I attempted to make also became my bullies as I was so desperate for connection, I ignored patterns of behaviour and did anything to attempt to maintain an unhealthy friendship to not be alone. This only isolated me further and made me give up on attempting to make friends or have the emotional energy to maintain existing ones.

I turned to online communities, as I felt safer having a physical barrier for social interaction. I did make some friends this way that were amazing that I am still in contact with to this day, but I also found myself in some very traumatic situations and an extremely toxic online relationship at only 14-15yrs old that lasted till I was 18yrs old due to my extremely poor self-esteem and feelings of loneliness and isolation.

I was constantly name-called by students, or confronted whenever I wheeled through the school grounds and this made me hide myself any chance I got – staying inside during breaks, finding a quiet corner of the library, purposely being late for class so I could go through the corridors when they were empty, etc.

Some examples of these interactions are:

- My first day of High School (year 7), I was leaned over by a male year 10 student who said some disgusting and explicit things while trying to block my path before my cousin stepped in to protect me, and his apology later was 'I am sorry, I thought you were a retard that couldn't understand me anyway'.
- Students attempting to sneak up on me and jump on the back of my powered wheelchair for a 'ride' without my consent.
- Students I didn't know, screaming out "Hey Big Wheels!" or singing "they see me rolling, they hating..." (or getting a speaker out and playing the song loudly as they followed me around campus).
- A student calling me a cripple, buckteeth, spitting spit balls at me, stealing my belongings and drawing a mocking picture of me on the whiteboard – all during class as a teacher watched. It was another 3 students that stepped in to protect me, get my belongings back and erased the picture. And got in trouble for cussing out the bully.

I did dive into my studies where I could and moved into the Big Picture Program in years 9 and 10, where I could learn independently and focus on the skills I did have. The students there were more accepting, and it became a bit of a safe haven that I barely left (eating lunch in the classrooms, continuing with my studies during breaks, avoiding social interactions, etc.).

Years 11 and 12 were better, as I had friends from primary school attending with me. I socialized more than in previous schoolings years – but had a lot of trouble with teachers and accommodations.

A particular teacher singled me out repeatedly, calling me by the wrong name (Bethany, Bridget, Bec, etc. anything but my actual name), yelling to students before every class to look out for me – 'remember we have a disabled student in the classroom with a wheelchair', if I asked for his assistance for anything (e.g. passing me a single item I couldn't reach, or an actual question about the lesson, etc.) he would make a huge deal about it and repeatedly tell me that I needed a TA despite me insisting I could be independent.

It escalated to the point my mum got involved, went to the principal as he had written a discriminatory note in my visual art diary, and I transferred out of his class. Yet he still tracked me down to my new subject, insisted I come back to his class as I hadn't transferred 'correctly' and was meant to come to him for him to 'consent' to me transferring (this was bypassed by the principal due to my comfortability with the teacher). Attempted to get me to come in a room alone with him to discuss my 'issues', despite me insisting that I felt unsafe doing so and would not be as I had approval already. He did all this at the back of an art classroom, when the teacher was distracted and through a back door – which heightened my fear and made me appreciate having my friend present and insisting that if I were to go with him that she came to, as I felt unsafe being alone with him. This made him upset and angry. In an attempt to appease him, I told him about my anxiety issues and how the way he made it a thousand times worse with all his actions in that moment and during class – and how it is teachers like him that get kids like me bullied as students mimic behaviour. Thankfully this made him leave in a huff.

I was heartbroken though, as the subject he taught was photography. At the time, that was what I wanted to do as a profession and his actions caused me to have to transfer out of the only course I genuinely wanted to learn and thrive in. This derailed my eagerness to attend, and the positiveness that I felt at the beginning of the school year – because if I was not doing what I really wanted, what was the point?

Staying in school (e.g. Did you leave school early? Did you attend school regularly?)

Primary School, despite my issues there, I attended every day that I could and was genuinely distraught missing days for medical reasons. Because I had friends. I had support, and although there were bullies – the peers looking out for me out-numbered them. And at that age, I could understand why the 'bullies' acted the way they did and even became friendly with some of them.

High School was a different story, from the first year I would beg my mum to let me stay home any chance that I had. By year 9 and 10, even with the Big Picture Program, I was having severe panic attacks almost every morning at the thought of going to school – going mute, crying, trembling, etc. I was given permission by teachers, due to my mental health, to do my schoolwork at home on those days. I ended up not attending school for around 6 months of year 10.

Year 11 and 12, I attempted to have a fresh start but after the photography teacher – my confidence and optimism plummeted. My attendance dropped dramatically again but I managed to get through Year 11 with a lot of outside support. Year 12, I did not complete or attend regularly at all.

Educational outcomes (e.g. Did an experience of Bullying or discrimination impact your grades, or contribute to not finishing school or graduating without a TCE or equivalent? How do you feel about further study now?)

My grades fluctuated heavily due to all the above-mentioned situations, the state of my mental health determined my grades – or the number of times I was pulled out of class for unnecessary activities. I still struggle with math to this day due to it being the main class that I would miss in Primary School, it gives me extreme anxiety and harder mathematical problems will make me cry. I am 23 years old.

Year 12 came to a crashing halt due to personal circumstances and my health, piling on top of already existing experiences and I did not complete College or get my TCE due to lack of attendance (despite completing satisfactory course work to pass the classes at home).

I did not continue onto further education (TAFE, Uni, etc.), and still have quite a lot of apprehension regarding going back due to my experience of lack of accessibility and understanding from teaching staff.

I was recently diagnosed with severe ADHD, which was missed throughout all my schooling years and would have heavily impacted my mental and emotional health – along with my ability to learn. I was made feel crazy, disrespectful and like a burden throughout my schooling years while still being expected to perform at an inaccessible standardized level and this only taught me to put immense pressure on myself and hurt myself physically and mentally to make myself attempt to meet those standards. Along with the social pressure of attempting to fit in and navigate bullying. These are not feelings that I wish to feel again and have caused me to not continue with my studies.

Recommendations:

-Better staff training for PWD

Signed: Britt Wilson

ACD Tas Youth Connector

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools.

The impact of discrimination and bullying:

My name is Nicole, and I am writing this submission both personally and professionally. I experienced bullying all through compulsory education.

I am now an adult who has recently completed tertiary education (BA) after finishing Year 13.

I am a Youth Connector at the Association for Children with Disability Tasmania who works alongside young people with a disability or a disabling health condition. Many or all participants have expressed concern about bullying as a result of their own lived experience.

Some of these young people have finished compulsory education and some are close to completion - over the four years I have been in this job, one in six did not complete compulsory education. I have heard that bullying is evident in their schools, and this treatment is interwoven with their disabilities (as was my experience).

Whether students remain in education or not, it should be undeniably acknowledged that bullying and discrimination at this critical time in life creates long lasting effects.

From a personal standpoint, I have a disability which includes a sensory (vision impairment), physical and metabolic condition of which I cannot change or control.

I entered the Tasmanian school system in grade three, from Western Australia. As a result of my eye condition being degenerative, I became legally blind at the age of thirteen, in grade six which seemed to correlate with an increased

prevalence and severity of bullying. The impacts of bullying where made more challenging not only because I was adapting to my loss of vision but transitioning from primary school to secondary school and adjusting to a new environment and dynamics within the new school. All these factors increased my susceptibility to poor mental health, the continuation of bullying and the decline of my mental health along with my grades. Because, I was different, I did not have many friends but people I used to call fake friends.

When discussing bullying in school, I feel that it is vital to consider chronological age and the corresponding psychological and emotional development, health and wellbeing. For example, youth and young people are not only experiencing physiological changes but also learning to identify and navigate within a world of rapid changes, expectations and pressures. Furthermore, the meaning an individual gives to their experience is shaped by the same changing world and their social interactions within schools and the wider society. For me, the peers I associated with started viewing me in a particular way, in which I started viewing myself, in accordance with the perception of others. This reality remains and fragments of this reality follow me in my adult life. My experience of bullying does not stop with the incidence, but it shapes who I am today and how I interact in the world.

Additionally, I want to emphasis the social and psychological cost of bullying which is experienced by many within Tasmanian school and through compulsory education. bullying is a problem for anyone at any age and stage of life. However, people with intersections such as race, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability are disproportionately impacted by bullying.

Post traumatic growth may have resulted from bullying and not being fully accepted for who you are, but the reality is that it is a long painful journey for acceptance, healing and learning, a journey that will probably be lifelong as those experiences still effect and overshadow my day-to-day life and opportunities.

Please refer to the terms of reference below and the associated themes identified:

Student participation and staying at school to improve educational outcomes:

- To improve social connection.
- To encourage good inclusion practice.
- The creation of safe and supportive spaces.
- To foster a system that supports teaching and support staff.

After the terms of reference, I will present some plausible recommendations and strategies for the themes provided.

Terms of reference:

Impacts on student participation:

The people who bullied me were not only in my grade and in my class. This made participation in class limited when it came to group discussions, projects and activities including physical activity/health and wellbeing classes. As a result of my loss of vision some activities, especially physical activity/health and wellbeing classes were adapted for me, or I would sit out and observe the other students.

The majority of lunchtimes were spent alone, running or hiding away from the people who bullied me. In primary school, Mum and the admin staff organized a safe space within the staff room of which I could stay until lunch finished.

Fortunately, due to the lack of social media and technological advancement at the time, I was not subjected to cyber bullying. My experience of bullying finished when I left school, it continued when I got to school, in class, in the yard and at after school care.

Staying in school:

I did not leave school early but in secondary school my parents were contemplating withdrawing me from school and transferring me to a new one.

Prior to that, I went to the local public primary school. However, when I moved secondary school a collective decision on behalf of my parents and myself to attend private high school (all-girls school, as I had previously experienced bullying enacted by mostly boys). The decision to attend a private school was

made despite the financial and demographic constraints, of which my other siblings did not need to endure, as they went to local public schools.

Educational outcomes:

In college (11 & 12) I did an extra year, year 13 to obtain my TCE. I completed an extra year due to my lack of grades in primary school and high school and a lack of academic performance. It is hard to pinpoint as to the reason why I had low grades. It may have been due to my disability, where and how I grew up and what people I associated with or what was happening in the world at the time. However, as bullying continued and my peers and school staff were doubting my ability, my mental health deteriorated, and so did my grades. In addition, my Queen's Guide Award granted me points towards my TCE (I probably would not have achieved my TCE let alone a TQA without it). Additionally, when I got to college I was not bullied as severely, and the teaching staff supported me, my grades generally started to improve.

At present, I have completed a university degree and a Certificate III. In total I have been in tertiary education part-time for seven and a half years. Overall, tertiary education was my best experience of education. I experienced minimal bullying, made a couple of friends each semester and even had a private study room which became my safe space if I needed it.

Education itself was not the issue, it is the bullying within schools and the education system that is problematic. However, in saying this, the education system can pave the way in support of prevention, awareness and solutions to minimize bullying in schools. Therefore, these schools could mitigate the consequences of bullying such as individual reduction of health and wellbeing, friendships and connections, sense of ability or agency to become active citizen in society. The terms of reference and themes identified will now be concluded with the following recommendations.

Conclusion and personal recommendations:

My experience of bullying is unfortunately common, but this does not mean it should become normative, unimportant, go unaddressed or unnoticed. When I was in primary school, I was the only person with a visible disability and perhaps the only person with a disability that my peers have come across. As I progressed in my education more people expressed having an identified disability and with that came more awareness and accommodations. Anti-

discrimination and the education standards also supported this awareness and positive change.

Bullying is not just an issue isolated within a school yard or educational context, but it also reflected through society as a whole. However, social change is possible through domains of awareness, open dialogue and supported, sharing of stories and experience, changing community attitudes, representation and human rights focus advocacy can be fostered in schools and society. Moreover, schools can foster the same values through education, socialisation, connection and restorative relationships. Even though, primary socialisation starts before school, secondary socialisation continues with peers and teachers.

Other recommendations I would have benefitted from:

Student participation:

- Before and during the school year, teaching staff can provide support by meeting with all parent/family and the child both prior or during school time which focuses on foundational trust and understanding.
- The creation of safe, quiet, obligation free space.
- To create awareness by supporting teachers and staff to identify that learning and education spans outside the classroom, within the school yard, whether it be play, connection, conflict, isolation or positive or negative attitudes and resulting actions.

Staying at school:

- For everyone to know and advocate for their rights at school including the option to transfer/withdraw from that school through specific circumstances.
- Parent teacher interviews that discuss social and emotional wellbeing and learning outside the classroom.
- Believe children when they tell you something, no matter how big or small.
- Make sure no student including underperforming and “misbehaving” students do not slip through the cracks of the education system.

Increasing education and resources for teachers, staff and school curriculum:

- Teaching degrees to include supports for new teachers with needed resources, knowledge and robust support systems. Refresher training for more experienced teachers.
- For best practice, knowledge and awareness of disability, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity should be taught through and by those with direct lived experience.
- Invite and open dialogue that requires discussion of what and why assumptions, stereotypes and why and how these factors can be harmful, etc.
- Through incorporating a polarity of diverse histories and knowledge into the school curriculum.
- The incorporation of social and emotional learning and wellbeing beyond the early years by creating a deeper understanding of play, peers, role and connection in an age appropriate and applicable context.
- Education and training for students, families and staff on friendships, relationships, social skills, conflict and its resolution. Teach and model the importance of support and help seeking through creating a safe environment in which and proactive strategies before, during or after the harm or bullying has occurred.
- Give teachers the training and resources to be a safe person who does not intensify or add to any harm or bullying.
- Inclusion.

Responding to bullying:

- For the school to have a process of how to respond to bullying outside of a zero-tolerance rhetoric that does not shame or punish the person who is doing the bullying. Strategies such as these may reinforce power dynamics and conflict similar to bullying which may produce adverse consequences and make matters worse for the person who is doing the bullying, being bullied and for everyone else who is involved.
- Once a situation has occurred, being proactive and engaging with the parents and the child as to what supports are being put in place but also what is being done to resolve the situation.

- When seeking resolution beneficial strategies that consider who is doing the bullying and not solely who is being bullied responding to bullying first explore.
- Before opting for solutions, first create an understanding to explore and endeavor to create understanding and awareness of the social context as to the possible reasons why and what conditions produce the act of bullying. This can address the causes of the causes.
- If it is safe to do so support the child, peers and parents to have a transparent, supportive and nonjudgmental conversation to reach a possible resolution.

Please note that I will also be speaking about my personal experience to the inquiry on behalf of Blind Citizens Australia.

Signed: Nicole McKillop

ACD Tas Youth Connector

Work email: [REDACTED]