

Submission
No 1

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL
SETTINGS**

Name: Name suppressed
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Partially
Confidential

I have cerebral palsy. I went to a segregated school for kindergarten and entered mainstream school in 1976, at the age of 6, for First Class, after I had learned to walk.

My parents knew that if I stayed in segregated schooling, I would have a very limited life and would be unlikely to reach my potential. They wanted me to live in the wider world. They expected me to get a job, not live on a pension. They were ahead of their time. Frustratingly, today's parents who share the same dreams for their disabled kids, often find that they too are "ahead of their time".

It's 2023. It's time the non-disabled community caught up.

School wasn't always easy for me. I was academically strong but there were periods of bullying, as is the case for many kids. The bullies never mentioned my disability so I can't be sure how much it was a factor.

There were also lots of positive experiences – like the class trip to rural NSW for a week in primary school, and the running race at the athletics carnival where I was given a head start and won. In high school, I participated in class debates, fashion parades to show off what we'd made in Textiles (where I remember being loudly applauded as I walked the catwalk) and yearly Christmas Carol Services, where I read the lesson to hundreds of people. I competed against class mates and developed my academic skills further. I led the ISCF group and made weekly announcements to an assembly of 700 students. I sang at the Opera House as part of a combined schools choir. Most of my experiences were similar to those of my class mates. These opportunities all built my confidence and broadened my horizons. That would not have happened in a segregated school. My segregated school had less than 100 kids total. My primary school had 200. My high school had 700.

It recently came to my attention that my inclusion also had a positive impact on other students (and probably the teachers, too). I was going through the park in my wheelchair when someone called out. It was a woman I'd been in high school with. While we were catching up, an older man I'd never met interrupted our conversation. My exchange with him went like this;

Him : How long have you been in a wheelchair?

Me: A few years.

Him: I have another friend who uses a wheelchair and her life is very difficult. Yours must be too.

Me: Actually, I quite like my life and I find my wheelchair gives me a lot of freedom.

When the man left, my friend said something like, "What makes him think he can speak to you like that?"

She didn't consider it acceptable, as he did, to command the attention of a person in a wheelchair so that you can tell them how awful you assume their life is, without actually knowing anything about them.

She hadn't seen me for years, but she didn't assume my life was awful. In fact, she told me that, when we were at school, I was one of the people she wished she could be like. She didn't think of me as "the tragic, disabled one". She knew me as a person who'd been academically strong and contributed to the school.

We need inclusive education so that disabled people don't need to keep having these weird conversations with random strangers.

Since high school, I've completed three degrees including a Master's. Finding a new job has often been difficult because most employers balk at employing disabled people. Having been segregated from us at school, they don't feel comfortable including us in the workplace. They don't feel like it's necessary, either and there's almost always a more comfortable choice available to them. As a result, I've been economically disadvantaged and am a lifetime tenant. If I hadn't been discriminated against, I'd probably be a home owner with a much healthier superannuation account.

The disability unemployment rate is double the general one. Disabled people struggle to find housing that is accessible and affordable. This needs to change. Our inclusion at school will normalise our inclusion in the workforce and the housing market. People will expect to live and work alongside us.

I'm now once again enjoying employment and the contribution it enables me to make. I'm also part of two community choirs and other community groups. I perform at folk music festivals. My participation means people interact with someone with disability on familiar territory. As a result, I am neither a freak nor an inspiration. I'm a person with whom they have things in common whose life experience is in some ways similar and in others different.

I have a strong group of friends who are there for me when I'm out of work or struggling to find a new place to live that's accessible enough. I'm not reliant on a pension or paid support workers.

We need inclusive education to normalise inclusion, so that disabled people can enjoy a social life, reach our potential, get good jobs and pay taxes. Our impairments impose some limitations on us. We don't need any more, imposed by the ignorant assumptions of people who see us as "separate" because *they* went to a segregated school, where disabled kids weren't welcome.