MUTED VOICES

The Views of Families on Special Schools

ASEPA
AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL
EDUCATION PRINCIPALS'
ASSOCIATION

ACU
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

The Research Team

Chief Investigators: Emeritus Professor Tania Aspland (ACU)
                           Dr Fiona Forbes (ASEPA)

Research Assistants: Dr Poulomee Datta (Macquarie University)
                           Dr Joy Talukdar (ACU)

Acknowledgements

Suggested Citation

Executive Summary

The aim of this project is to explore the differential perspectives of families of students with disabilities (SWD) regarding their children in Australian special schools, and to highlight measures by which such voices might be heard by significant stakeholders.

At the outset, the project was conceptualised to achieve the following outcomes:
- to establish a credible body of evidence from families regarding their experiences of special settings;
- to provide information from families on curriculum and other school practices that add value to the learning experiences of SWD;
- to illustrate those mechanisms which enable families of SWD to be included in dialogues regarding the educational and social progress of their children
- to offer suggestions regarding the ways that families of SWDs in special schools can positively contribute to advancing the inclusive practice agenda in all Australian schools.

The study was specifically designed to capture the perspectives of families regarding the opportunities to consult and engage with teachers on the education of their child or children with disabilities across special schools in Australia. The methodology provided a framework of investigation critical to the research in this study.

The Australian Special Education Principals' Association (ASEPA) funded the study. The scope of this research was ambitious in its targeting families of SWD in Australian special schools across all educational jurisdictions in each State and Territory in Australia. To our knowledge, this project is the first to specifically survey this group of parents, guardians, and carers of SWD in special schools across the whole of Australia.

Further, a significant body of parental voices have been manifested through this study providing a rich bank of perspectives regarding their preferred delivery models of education for their families and children with disabilities. Parents, guardians, and carers of SWD in special schools across Australia were invited to participate in the anonymous online survey hosted in Qualtrics. The number of completed responses resulted in a sample size for the final set of analysed data of 390 out of a possible 500 responses. The study adopted an established survey instrument, a slightly adapted version of the 'Special Education Parent Satisfaction Survey' designed by the Northeastern Catholic District Board [NCDSB] in Canada, to address the project objectives and the Australian context (Northeastern Catholic District School Board, n.d.).

The aggregated survey results remain anonymous and there is no comparative analysis of the data across sectors or jurisdictions. This agreement is in keeping with the ethic clearance granted to the research team at the outset of the study.

MUTED VOICES

The voice of parents and caregivers for SWD in special education schools around Australia is as important as the voice of the children themselves in providing learning opportunities for them to thrive. With this statement as the heart of our study the following recommendations are forwarded for policy and practice.

Recommendations

VOICE

1. The voices of parents documented in this report and their advocacy for special school education that is aligned to the unique needs of their child is widely disseminated across the Australian community

PROVISION

2. Provision of special school education be sustained in order to ensure quality education for all children, inclusive of students with disabilities, in keeping with the UN Rights of the Child in providing every child with the best life that they can achieve (Article 3) through making the rights available to all children (Article 4) and to " respect the rights and responsibilities of families to guide their children…" (Article 5).

RESPONSIBILITY

3. Governments maintain and extend the funding of the quality educational and developmental programs offered to SWD by special schools in Australia.

COMMUNICATE

4. Schools continue to strengthen their communication with parents and guardians to arrive at and continuously review their child's progress from academic, life and social skills perspectives.

DIVERSITY

5. Communications with parents take into consideration the diverse backgrounds of families in entering and sustaining the relationship with staff, particularly regarding the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of parents.

CURRICULUM

6. Planning of learning opportunities is inclusive of discussions with parents regarding expectations to meet daily living skills, job and community skills, self-determination skills, and social and communication skills as well as curriculum expectations including the development of academic literacy and numeracy skills.

UPDATE

7. Schools consult, inform and report to parents of the technology and programs adopted by staff to achieve their child's goals and outcomes.

FUNDING

8. Systems and sectors reassure parents that special schools will continue to be allocated the appropriate resources to adequately staff and support students.

TRAINING

9. Pre-service teacher preparation providers consider making special education subjects compulsory within initial teacher preparation programs.

10. Sufficient funding for professional development is in place for teachers and the support staff within special schools if inclusive education is to be achieved for all.

Contents

Key Terms

Accommodation: Used to describe an alteration of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows an individual with a disability to gain access to content and/or complete assigned tasks.

Allied health professionals: Provide crucial support for people experiencing disability, chronic illness and a wide range of other health issues.

Early Intervention: A collection of therapy and support services that provide children from birth to 8 years old.

Inclusive Education: Including disabled students with non-disabled students in every aspect of education.

Individual Adjustment/Education/Learning Plan (IA/E/LP): a written document prepared for a student which specifies the learning goals to be achieved over a set period of time and the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals

Mainstreaming: full-time placement of students considered to have mild learning and/or behavioral differences in regular classrooms.

Modification: describes a change in the curriculum.

Open-ended: used for narrative responses and can also be used to obtain short responses.

Closed ended: Question to which an answer must be selected from a limited set of pre-defined responses.

Parent: the person with legal and moral responsible for a student.

School Learning and Support Officer: the role of a teaching assistant.

Special school(s): Specialist and intensive support provided in a dedicated school setting for students with moderate to high learning and support needs and is known by different names in different jurisdiction including but not limited to specialist schools and education support centres and schools

Teacher Aide/Teaching Assistant: an adult who works in the classroom to support teachers, known by different names in different jurisdiction including but net limited to school learning and support officers.

Therapist: a person skilled an licensed in a particular kind of therapy

Augmented and Alternative Communication (AAC): Communication inteventions used for students with autism with minimal verbal language development.

The Research Report

Background And Context

In the backdrop of any discussion regarding the contexts of education in Australia are two UN Conventions to which Australia is a signatory. The first is Article 18 of the Right of the Child (CRC), (CRC, United Nations, 1990) and the second is Article 24 of the 2008 Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), (CRPD, United Nations [UN], 2006, 2020).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1990) has been adopted internationally and calls on the broader society and governments to work towards providing every child with the best life that they can achieve (Article 3) through making the rights available to all children (Article 4). In particular, governments are required to respect the rights and responsibilities of families to guide their children… (Article 5), a particularly important responsibility when it comes to public schooling.

> The UN CRC article 18 states
> 1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.
>
> 2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

Similarly, responsibilities are reflected in the Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities (2008). The CRPD acknowledges the right of people with disability to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.

It provides as follows:
States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:
- the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- the development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society)UN, 2020, para. 1).

In realising this right, States Parties shall ensure that: '

- persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;
- persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
- reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;
- persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
- effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion (UN, 2020, para. 2).

This convention demonstrates the commitment of the sponsoring body of this research to advocate for all students to receive the very best education as an individual within an educational setting that :

- values each student's rignts as a human being
- provides access to a full and appropriate education
- enables each student to maximize his or her learning potential in a safe respectful and facilitative learning environment
- is in harmony with the school community.

From a legal perspective, the key sources of protection for families and students under Commonwealth law for Australian schools in relation to SWD are the Disability Discrimination Act: A Commonwealth Act (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019) which renders it unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a student on the basis of the student's disability and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth) (DSE, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). The DSE is a Commonwealth legislative instrument designed to ensure that persons with disability have the same rights to an equal education as the broader community.

Thus, from an educational and a legal perspective, all students and families in Australia should feel confident that they are entitled to full access to an excellent education no matter their position in life, culturally, geographically, socially, physically, emotionally or intellectually. This is also confirmed within the recent government undertaking expressed through the Mparntwe Agreement 2019 (Australian Governments Education Council, 2019): "Our vision is for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face". (Australian Governments Education Council, 2019, p. 2) In Australia in 2019, the Disability Royal Commission was established in response to long-term community concerns about violence against, and the neglect, abuse and exploitation of, people with disability (Royal Commission, 2020a, para. 2).

The Disability Royal Commission was commissioned to investigate:
- violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation;
- achieving best practice in reporting, investigating and responding to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability;
- promoting a more inclusive society that supports people with disability to be independent and live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation (Royal Commission, 2020a, para. 2).

Since its inception there have been a series of public hearings conducted by the Commission, the publication of a range of issues papers, and over 2000 submissions have been received from the public, ranging from families sharing their experiences to experts responding to issues papers in the various fields of concern. Whilst the progress of the Commission has been delayed by the global pandemic, public hearings are continuing in 2021. Of interest to this report was the release of the 'Education and Learning Issues Paper' in October 2019 (Royal Commission, 2020b). This paper was adapted from a background paper that was prepared for the Education and Learning Workshop held in Melbourne on 3 October 2019.

The paper outlines the key issues and barriers experienced by SWD, including access to education and learning and the appropriateness and adaptability of education and learning. Twelve months later, a public hearing was conducted in Brisbane on October 2020, designed to investigate the barriers experienced by SWD in accessing and obtaining a safe, quality and inclusive school education and life course impacts. The Royal Commission selected education as the first topic for a public hearing because of its importance to the life experiences of people with disability. Several witnesses told the Royal Commission that poor educational experiences can have a significant negative impact on the life-course of SWD, for example in relation to employment and mental health.

The scope and purpose of the public hearing included a range of pre-determined themes as they relate to the experiences of students with disability, including:
- the impact on students with disability of absences, suspensions, exclusions and expulsion from school;
- the re-engagement of students with disability when they have experienced absences, suspensions, exclusions or expulsion from school;
- the provision of adjustments and supports, and the barriers to making reasonable adjustments and supports available, for students with disability;
- individualised planning for students with disability;
- the use of restrictive practices on students with disability;
- teacher training and qualification requirements for students with disability;
- the resulting impacts on the life course and mental health of students with disability who have experienced barriers in education, including the transition to higher education and employment (Royal Commission, 2020c, para. 3).

Throughout the hearings diverse opinions were presented by witnesses, through submissions and in response to the issues paper entitled Education and Learning Issues (Royal Commission, 2020b). The greatest debate at the philosophical level was and continues to focus on the rhetoric implicit in what is referred to as inclusive education, a concept in principle that strongly endorses the core constructs of CRPD.

However, it is at the level of practice that inclusivity becomes contested particularly as to whether it can be implemented across all educational settings or whether it be restricted to mainstream classes as some would advocate (Carrington, 1999). A broad range of research (Hehir et al., 2016) over the years has portrayed that while the intent of mainstreamed inclusive education is positive, many operational problems prevent its fulfillment. These Include gatekeeping, restrictive practices, low expectations, lack of adjustments, misuse of discipline, poor communication, lack of funding and training – all factors that have been reported throughout the hearings and have been duly recorded in Report 2 (August, 2020), the Commission's Interim Report in August 2020 (Royal Commission, 2020d) and more recently Report 3 in February, 2021 (Royal Commission, 2020e).

Mann in 2016 claimed that 88% of parents of disabled students transferred their children to special schools for a more accessible education, based on reasons aligned to gatekeeping and 69% due to poor student culture in the mainstream setting. Poed, Cologon and Jackson (2020) have reported increasing dissatisfaction from 745 families of students with over 70% reporting experiencing one or more examples of gatekeeping or restrictive practices in mainstream settings.

The debate regarding the nature of the education and what's best for SWD has been ongoing for many years but in short reflects a set of options between integration into mainstream classes or alternative segregated or specialised schooling. Both options can be positioned as examples of inclusive schooling albeit that all educational settings can be markedly different from one another. Florian (2019) has argued that the contest between special education and inclusive education should cease particularly when the conceptions of each orientation are not agreed upon in the literature nor across educational sectors. She proposed that it is important to distinguish between how special education can work in support of inclusive education and the task of inclusive education which addresses the barriers to participation such as those outlined in the hearings and listed above. Messiou (2017) also calls for a serious 'rethink' of inclusive education in order to enhance education for all students. de Bruin's (2019) analysis of the policy impact on practice shows that an increasing number of students have enrolled in special schools in Australia since the endorsement of the CPRD (unlike the United States of America) with students categorised on the Autism Spectrum experiencing greater separation in both countries.

To sum up, the contestations, dilemmas and debates around inclusive education are complex but not the focus of this report. In his remarks on closing this specific public hearing, the Chair, Ronald Sackville (Associated Offices Quality Certification [AO QC]) summarised the narratives provided throughout the hearing to date, and in doing so, stressed the difficulties that lay ahead in proposing recommendations to address the reported barriers experienced by families and students. He commented:

"…there is limited data available to inform policy making. For example, there is limited data on suspensions and exclusions, part-time attendance of students with disability and the use of restrictive practices in schools. It is difficult to address and rectify a problem if we do not fully understand its nature and extent".
(Royal Commission, 2020f, p. 4)

The final report from the Commission remains outstanding with further data collection and analysis to unfold during 2021 with the report due in 2022. However, it can be concluded that there is no better time for educational advocates such as school communities and their leaders to address the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the provision of education to SWD in the context of special schools in Australia. This will go some ways to providing deeper insights into a field where limited data can easily lead to misinformation and misconceptions about the educational experiences of students in special schools in Australia. While the Commission has focused its enquiry on a deficit model, namely barriers to education, this research is designed to investigate, from the perspectives of key stakeholders, the provision of special education to SWD in the context of special schools in Australia – both positive and negative – with a view to gaining, from a national perspective, deeper insights into the educational experiences of SWD as the basis of future reform and maintenance of a quality education through special school programs.

In doing so, the voices of the parents that are currently muted will be celebrated and made public in the interests of portraying to the broader community the ways that families of students attending special schools can positively contribute to advancing the inclusive practice agenda across the nation. It is the intention that this study is the first in a series that captures the voice of those who choose special education as the preferred schooling option for their young people. These 'Muted Voices' will play a vital part in gaining greater understanding of the role that special education schools play in the lives of the young Australians who thrive in their environments and indeed beyond. To the best of our knowledge, this project is the first to target and survey parents, guardians, and carers of SWD across the whole of Australia.

Literature Review

The present study was initiated in 2019, funded by ASEPA. A scoping completed by Aspland, Datta, & Talukdar (2012) of current policies in curriculum for students with special educational needs in Australia identifies policy documents across jurisdictions that reflect compliance to the expectations outlined in the Australian Curriculum and the Australian government's commitment to all students having access to learning through both a general school curriculum and one that is also responsive to individual student needs. However, it was noted that there was, and continues to be, a noticeable lack of data and strategic vision for children who require special education and curriculum modifications that ensures access to learning progression. The multiple levels of misalignment amongst curriculum, teachers, and students with special needs identified in 2012 (Aspland et al., 2012) still remains a serious concern for parents, as teachers continue to identify difficulties in coping with differentiation and the modifications required to be more inclusive of learners with special educational needs within the general curriculum framework.

In Australia, the empirical literature to date does not reflect any deep consultation with this group of parents of SWD who attend special schools. While there is an extensive literature of parent perspectives regarding the education of their children in the USA, a similar set of research findings is not evident to any great extent in Australia. This study will address that gap in the literature and provide a forum for this cohort of parents to speak out regarding the quality of education provided to their children in special schools in Australia.

As early as 1994, Fine and Gardner suggested that the voice of parents could become more overt through collaborative consultation with families of children with special needs (Fine & Gardner, 1994). Australia mandates this argument through the Disability Standards for Education 2005. Nevertheless, when in 2011, one state government consulted with over 300 parents and carers of children with disability about their current experiences in accessing and using services designed to support their child, and their family as a whole, it became overwhelmingly clear that there was, and still remains, a lack of consultation with parents and carers on many fronts, including a lack of consultation between parents and teachers in schools and education in early childhood centres claiming to cater for SWD (NSW Ombudsman, 2011). More than 10 years later, nothing has changed.

Adams, Harris, and Jones (2016) have argued that this problem is a serious one because through combining the teachers' and parents' knowledge and skills on instructional strategies and assessment practice is to work as a team in educating students with special needs, and in doing so is in the best interests of the student, the parents and the teacher. A number of authors (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hendersen & Mapp, 2002) have for some years, reported the centrality of meaningful engagement between families and educational providers in determining appropriate educational experiences for SWD, and yet evidence of such is scarce.

The current research addresses these shortcomings. This project is in alignment with the overarching goal of the 'Alice Springs (Mparntwe)' Education Declaration' (Australian Governments Education Council, 2019), one that posits all school sectors as essential in providing access to high-quality schooling irrespective of the background or capabilities of the individual and targeted towards a socially cohesive society.

A literature review was conducted to explore current literature and research findings that investigate the voices of parents, guardians, and carers of SWD enrolled in a special school setting. A number of research databases were searched with appropriate keywords and/or a combination of keywords as the search syntax across the information obtained, a number of topics within the research papers were established and each of these topics addressed the key research objectives. Four key topics were collated from the international literature, and these will be shared below with the specific purposes of offering deeper insights into the scope and concerns of parents across the world regarding the education of their children who are enrolled in a special school setting.

The topics include:
    1: Parent Voice, Advocacy, and Empowerment in Educational Decision Making
    2: Parents as Collaborators
    3: Parent's Perceptions of the learning opportunities through the curriculum
    4: The Home-School Relationship

Voice, Advocacy, and Empowerment

This body of knowledge illustrates the centrality of parental voice in enhancing their child's education. Fogle, Hoppey, and Allsopp (2020), through a heuristic case study focusing on parent-educators of children with autism, found that parental experiences and voices into the education of the child with a disability can not only improve the knowledge and experience towards parent advocacy and training but also foster effective parent-school partnerships. A similar study was conducted by Lo and Bui (2020). The mixed-methods study elicited voices of 13 Chinese American and 12 Vietnamese American parents of youth with autism and intellectual disabilities towards transition planning. Lo and Bui (2020) found that the parents expressed a keen interest to partake in the educational planning process of their child in order for them to become successful and independent in adult life. However, a lack of key information on the transition or graduation planning process at the schools' end prevented parents from being actively involved in the process. Similar to Fogle et al.'s (2020) assertion, Lo and Bui (2020) stressed the importance of developing effective school-community partnerships as a means to enhance the educational experience and support for children with disabilities. A 2019 qualitative study reported by Zagona, Miller, Kurth, and Love, examined perspectives and experiences of 18 parents and guardians of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities regarding special education services. The findings revealed both successes and concerns relating to the special education services their child was receiving at school. The majority of the disagreements with the school, as perceived by the parents, had to do with decisions on educational placement

and/or around the individualised special education services for their child. Such a disconnect between parents' expectations and the provision of services, as reported by the respondents in Zagona et al.'s (2019) study, were tagged to educator knowledge, preparation, and training. Zagona et al. (2019) further reported that some of the respondents in their study perceived receiving the agreed upon special education services for their child/children, either attributed to their persistence or result of effective collaboration and communication with the school personnel.

Effective parent-school collaboration and communication, and advocacy for children with social-communication needs was the topic for Burke, Meadan-Kaplansky, Patton, and Cumming's (2018) focus group study with 47 participants. The findings revealed that parent advocacy, whilst not necessarily contributing to increased services, certainly increased the professional attention to parent concerns and student challenges.

Cavendish and Connor (2018) highlight the challenges encountered around school-parent collaboration noting tensions in the school-home partnership. However these authors also show that parental participation is integral in teacher preparation and professional development and notes the importance of collaboration as an equal partnership. Hsiao, Higgins, and Diamond (2018) in their review note the significance of parent empowerment in addressing the needs of children with disabilities and find that stronger reciprocal connections among the school, parents, teachers, must be achieved if parents are to become empowered entities rather than being passive recipients of decisions made by teachers regarding their child.

Burke and Hodapp in their 2016 national web-based survey with 1087 parents of SWD sought to explore the nature, correlates, and conditions of parental advocacy in special education. Their findings revealed a higher level of advocacy among parents who enacted their procedural safeguards, reported less satisfactory partnerships with schools, and were less satisfied with the educational services provided at special schools. Not surprisingly, parents who reported positive experiences in the education of their child, engaged in lesser amounts of advocacy (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Burke and Hodapp (2016) added: Given this trend in the findings, practitioners need to monitor advocacy activities to ensure that the educational needs of the child are met through ongoing attempts to inculcate systemic changes in the services.

In a different 2016 qualitative focus group study conducted in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States of America and as reported by Buchanan, Nese, and Clark, 13 parents and 14 teachers voiced their perspectives towards the needs of students with emotional and behavioural disorders transitioning between school settings. The findings of Buchanan et al.'s (2016) research, albeit surfacing tensions between teachers and parents primarily to do with effective communication and supporting transitioning student's needs, had both groups of participants equivocally advocate the need for home-school communication and collaboration as the means to cater to the needs of

these cohorts of students. In a similar vein, Blustein, Carter, and McMillan's (2016) survey research across 137 invited school districts in the USA, had 1,065 parents of children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities voice their perspectives regarding the post-high school expectations, priorities, and concerns for their child. The findings of Blustein et al.'s (2016) study highlighted the importance of a positive reciprocal relationship between the school and home as the means to effectively design and provide services meeting the needs of the children and the family.

Family experiences in special education are commonly presented from a gendered perspective, commonly female. Mueller and Buckley (2014) in their qualitative interview study sought to elicit male (n = 20) family voices of children with disabilities. The findings of their study revealed that fathers often found the planning meetings overwhelming and insufficient, which in the view of the respondents needed extensive restructuring and revising so that the process becomes more solution-focused and easy to follow.

Further, the respondents in Mueller and Buckley's (2014) study noted relationship building, effective communication, and prioritising parent voice as a means to promoting collaboration and resolving conflicts. A similar study eliciting parent voices towards school practices and parent advocacy in special education was conducted by Bacon and Causton-Theoharis in 2013. Data was collected with 17 families using open-ended interviews coupled to planning meeting observations and/ or document analyses. Parents reported more effective collaboration and positive school practices were required if a more balanced approach was to be achieved.

Williams (2012) explored teacher candidate perceptions and interactions with families of children with diagnosed disabilities. A qualitative methodology informed the study with 33 student teachers who were enrolled in the Families as Faculty (FAF) Program at New Mexico State University and Indiana University-South Bend. The FAF Program is designed to engage teacher candidates with special needs populations as a means to interact and understand family needs and experiences. The respondents in Williams's (2012) study, following visits to homes of children with a variety of disabling conditions, noted an enhanced understanding about family characteristics and needs, aspects of positive and negative interactions with schools, and a better understanding of parenting fears and frustrations regarding the raising of an exceptional child. Williams (2012) asserted the importance of strong parent-school partnerships as leading the way for SWD being more successful and becoming more socially aware individuals.

Parents participating in Starr and Foy's (2012) research (N=144) commented on aspects of teachers' ability to manage children's behaviour, teacher knowledge and understanding of the concerned disability, and the quality of collaboration and communication as indicators of a quality education experience of their child/children. In a similar vein, Obiakor et al.'s (2012) review into what fosters inclusion in general education classrooms, reported on the importance of the interplay amongst a

quality educational experience together with collaborative and concerted efforts by the school, the parents, the community, and service providers. Nespor and Hicks (2010), too, in their interviews with 24 parents of children with varying disabilities, articulated that parental advocacy can effectively translate special education policies into practice whilst bringing contentious issues to public debate.

The studies reviewed in this section delineated the importance of parent advocacy in education-related decision making. The majority of the empirical research findings and reviews established that parental experiences and voices into the education of the child with a disability can not only improve the knowledge and experience of teachers and their attitudes towards parent advocacy and training but also foster effective parent-school partnerships. And yet, as simple as this may seem, the relationships between home and school remain fraught with challenges as this literature illustrates. Further in the Australian context research of this type is limited, suggesting little interest by educational researchers in the voice of parents who have children enrolled in special schools.

Parents as Collaborators

Narr and Kemmery's (2015) qualitative research data provided by parent mentors of more than 1,000 families of deaf/hard-of-hearing children, established that parent-to-parent support and early intervention programs can be integral to documenting the necessary dimensions of support for culturally diverse families of deaf/hard-of-hearing children. A different survey reported by Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015), on the other hand, presented the findings of 28 teacher candidates paired with 14 host families, investigating the implementation of a FAF Program jointly developed by a parent centre and a special education program. The FAF Program exposes pre-service teachers to special needs populations as a means to interact and understand family needs and experiences. The findings of the study revealed that teachers, whilst working collaboratively with parents, developed an enhanced understanding towards opportunities to improve services, develop effective home-school partnerships, and to address positive outcomes for SWD (Collier et al., 2015).

deFur (2012) contended that mutual trust and respect provided the foundation of effective collaborative partnerships. Likewise, service providers who adopt a partnership philosophy and practices in accordance with partnership principles, and who consider parents as equal partners in educational decision-making, ensure the most successful collaborative partnerships (deFur 2012) within special school settings. In the same year, Conroy (2012) investigated aspects of successful collaborations through the lens of culturally and linguistically diverse families in rural schools in the US who receive special education services. Conroy stressed that an understanding of cultural issues, frequent informal and formal meetings, and open communication are key to teachers building trusting relationship with families of SWD. Such meaningful relationships and empowerment of families in the school process, as reiterated by Conroy (2012)

,

provide opportunities for families to become meaningfully involved in the education of the child/children with a disability and enhance levels of satisfaction for all parties.

Parenting a child with a learning disability was the topic for Gross's (2011) case study research. Gross's findings, from the viewpoint of a parent and a teacher, identified the importance of building deeper understandings between partners of the issues central to raising a child with learning disabilities. Gross determined that mutual collaboration between the educator and the parent(s), is instrumental in understanding and working towards catering for the complex needs of the learner with a disability within classroom settings.

Trainor's (2010a) study employing focus group interviews with 17 general and special educators enumerated the role of cultural and social capital in shaping educator's expectations of parent participation in the education of their child. The findings revealed that disability acknowledgement and acceptance of disability-related information constitute capital factors for parent participation and home-school collaboration, whilst also promoting parent advocacy skills. Trainor (2010b) reported on a similar study juxtaposing the role of cultural and social capital with parent participation in special education. Data from focus groups and interviews with 27 families that included 36 children who received special education services for a range of impacting disabilities, informed the study findings. The analysis of the findings revealed that, from the perspective of parents, structural components of special education services can plague effective home-school collaboration, that in turn, can impact negatively on advocacy and parent participation.

The studies reviewed in this topic delineated the importance of parents as effective stakeholders and collaborators in the educational decision-making regarding programming and catering for their children with disabilities in classroom settings. The majority of the empirical research findings confirm that collaborative partnerships and parent participation in the education of their child are essential to addressing positive outcomes for SWD, albeit difficult to achieve at times due to structural, cultural, social or relational factors.

Parent's Perspectives regarding individual planning

MacLeod, Causton, Radel, and Radel (2017), collected qualitative data from 35 parents of SWD within one jurisdiction in the USA. The listed parental concerns that were perceived to limit effective collaboration with the school are: (i) persistent fears and anxieties attributed to a lack of effective and timely communication (ii) issues of trust and (iii) negative perceptions of disability. While strong collaborative home-school partnerships were reported by some of the parents, the factors of fear and anxiety integral to the need to constantly advocate for inclusive services constituted the main barriers to an effective collaboration. In terms of the planning, the parents participating in the study noted that individual planning teams were helpful in addressing the issue of deficit perspectives about disability by creating a positive student profiles through the IEP.

While parents valued the positive approach, they also found such positivity slightly misleading and challenging in terms of trust and communication. Simply put, positive reports were often misleading in terms of student growth and learning gains. As a result, parents called for a paradigm shift from a deficit perspective to an attribute perspective when working with SWD and their families incorporating systematic evidence to support statements of development and achievement (MacLeod et al., 2017).

Akin to the study above, Zeitlin and Curcic (2014)'s interviews with 20 parents found the individual planning process and documentation, "overwhelming, legalistic, and deficit focused" (p. 386). Parents recommended that engagement be reconstituted in a more meaningful, compliant, and simpler manner including the incorporation of parent-friendly language, with a specific focus on progress in learning not the reverse.

Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, and Haring (2014), in their mixed-methods survey with 159 special education teachers, in the USA explored differences in parent and student participation and involvement in planning processes and systems across rural, urban, and suburban environments. The findings of the study revealed special education teachers in rural environments reporting significantly higher rates of parent and student participation and involvement in processes and systems as compared to their counterparts in urban and suburban environments. Williams-Diehm et al. (2014) attributed this difference to interrelatedness, communication, and support that is more apparent in rural settings, which according to them, inherently encompass elements necessary for collaborative student support.

Wolfe and Durán's (2013) review of nine studies found language barriers, cultural barriers, and insufficient information as problematic within planning processes. Based on the findings of the review, Wolfe and Durán's (2013) recommendations included the involvement of qualified interpreters to support educators and parents in order to ensure culturally and linguistically responsive practices and with a view to enhancing the levels of satisfaction with the process.

The studies reviewed in this topic , to do with parent perspectives regarding curriculum decision making and learning highlight the issues and concerns that permeate planning and learning activity from culturally diverse positioning of parents that may be overlooked by educators. The literature, therefore, suggests that a paradigm shift is required in some contexts if trust, understanding, and effective communication is to be established as central to curriculum decision making, learning and shared decision making in culturally diverse settings.

Barriers to the Home-School Relationship

This topic is focussed on the importance of effective partnerships between the home and school in fostering the education of the child with a disability and the identification of barriers that may constrain the relationship. Sedibe and Fourie (2018), in their research with 20 parents of children attending a special educational needs (SEN)

school in the Gauteng Province, South Africa, using focus group interviews as a method, sought to explore opportunities and challenges in parent-school partnerships. The findings of the study revealed family emotional stability, socio-economic constraints and the stigma of attending a special school, as key challenges to effective, home-school partnerships. These challenges, however, also prompted opportunities for the schools to developing guidelines for improving parent-school partnerships, based on families and parents being equal partners in educational decision-making as the key to addressing positive outcomes for SWD (Sedibe & Fourie, 2018).

A similar qualitative study reported by Chu (2014) investigated the perspectives of two teachers and two parents of Chinese American SWD regarding home-school communication. Key barriers to an effective home-school partnership included unstated assumptions and mismatched expectations between the parent and the educators. Unsurprisingly and similar to Sedibe and Fourie's (2018) findings, Chu argued the need for parents to be equal partners in educational decision-making despite hindrances posed by language or cultural differences.

An interesting piece of research around home-school relationships and the concepts of 'blame', 'guilt' and 'labels' was reported by Broomhead (2013) who highlighted a gap in the literature exploring the link between home-school relationships and blame. The study focused only on parents of children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). Semi-structured interviews with 15 educational professionals and 22 parents of children with various special educational needs in a select geographical region in the United Kingdom (UK) revealed that parental perceptions of blame, guilt and labelling were shaped by the nature of their child's special needs. Broomhead (2013), argued that such blame and guilt adversely impacted home-school partnerships and accordingly, stressed on the need for reform in relationship building designed to support the needs of SWD.

Parental advocacy in effective home-school interactions was the topic for Trainor's (2010b) qualitative interview research with 33 adults from 27 families representing 36 children. The findings of the study revealed intercultural and intracultural differences among the participating parents, which in turn, shaped their advocacy and access to information (cultural capital), relationships and connections between people (social capital). The findings in Trainor's study also revealed that the use of distinct cultural and/or social capital during advocacy for individuals and advocacy for systemic change, is different. Based on these findings, Trainor stressed the need for culturally responsive collaboration and communication when dealing with families with diverse backgrounds.

Another study reported by Parsons and Lewis (2010) elicited parent perspectives on the home-education of children with special needs or disabilities. Data were collected via an online survey with 27 parents, one that elicited their views and experiences of home-education. The findings of the survey revealed that the majority of the respondents

opted to home-school their child with a disability and attributed the decision to either unsatisfactory experiences in the formal provision (school) or the perceived failure of schools to meeting the needs of their child with a disability. Parsons and Lewis (2010), based on these findings, called for the need for policy makers to draw their attention towards an equitable access and provision of education for all by way of having "… educational needs not standards, … at the heart of the personalisation agenda" (p. 83).

The studies reviewed in this section highlighted the importance of effective partnerships between the home and school in enhancing the education of the child with a disability. The empirical research reviewed here portrays the barriers that impede effective collaboration between the home and the school in terms of the provision of education for the student with a disability. In addition, intercultural and intracultural differences between the educator and/or school and the parent(s) appeared to be the largest impacting factor on successful home-school partnerships. The reported studies were unanimous in their call for culturally responsive collaboration and communication when dealing with families with diverse backgrounds, as the key to effective, home-school collaboration in terms of the education and holistic development of the child with a disability.

In concluding the literature review, a number of key propositions can be elicited that are instrumental in platforming the study and the analysis of the data that follows. These include:

- The voices of parents is central to shaping effective learning and development in special school settings. Parental experiences and voices into the education of the child with a disability can not only improve the knowledge and experience of teachers and their attitudes towards parent advocacy and training but also foster effective parent-school partnerships. And yet, as simple as this may seem, the relationships between home and school can remain fraught with challenges that must be addressed.
- The voices of parents can shape curriculum decision making and learning for their child through strategic partnerships with teachers and leaders. Collaborative partnerships and parent participation in programming the education of SWD are essential components to addressing positive outcomes for their children, albeit difficult to achieve at times due to structural, cultural, social or relational factors.
- The voices of parents are calling for a greater role in the education of their child in special school settings. It is the parents' perspective that a paradigm shift is required in some contexts if trust, understanding, and effective communication is to be established as central to curriculum development and shared decision making across diverse settings. The shift suggests a move from a deficit planning model to an authentic inclusion of all key stakeholders including parents.
- Throughout the contemporary research literature there is a call for greater collaboration and communication with parents on behalf of their child as the key to effective, home-school collaboration in terms of the education and holistic development of the child with a disability.

Methodology

The study captures the perspectives of families on the opportunities to consult and engage with teachers regarding the education of their child or children with disabilities.

The project was designed to achieve the following outcomes:
- to establish a reliable body of evidence from parents regarding their experiences of specialist settings;
- to provide information from families on those curricular and other school practices that add value to the learning experiences of SWD;
- to illustrate those mechanisms which enable families of SWD to be included in dialogues regarding the educational and social progress of their children; and
- to offer suggestions regarding the ways that families of SWDs in specialist schools can positively contribute to advancing the inclusive practice agenda in all Australian schools.

The following key questions were central to the methodology:

1: What are the perspectives of families of SWD in special settings towards the type and frequency of educational support that their child/children receive

2: What are the perspectives of families of SWD in special settings towards the understanding and recognition of their child/children's strengths and needs at school?

3: What are the perspectives of families of SWD in special settings towards the accommodations and/or modifications to the curriculum expectations that's in place to support their child/children at school?

4: What are the perspectives of families of SWD in special settings towards access to technology and other programs and services in place to support their child/children at school?

5: What are the perspectives of families of SWD in special settings towards the overall learning experiences of their child/children at school?

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument is an adapted version of the 'Special Education Parent Satisfaction Survey' designed by the Northeastern Catholic District Board (NCDSB) in Canada, the items of which have been tested and validated in earlier and similar studies in relation to special education settings in the USA (Northeastern Catholic District School Board, n.d.).

The survey (Appendix 1) essentially models the family experience with Special Education services in NCDSB schools and contains a consortium of demographic and close-ended (Likert-type) and open-ended items (n=17 in total). The online survey using the survey hosting site 'Qualtrics' was administered with parents, guardians, and carers of SWD across special school settings in Australia following appropriate ethics clearance and consent. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, confidential, and unidentifiable. Further,F consenting participants could withdraw at any time.

The mixed-methods approach adopted for this study captured both quantitative information, and qualitative data through the following means:

- Questions 1-5 are demographic in nature and are designed to obtain background information particularly in relation to the student.
- Questions 6-14 elicit quantifiable Likert-type information to do with participant perspectives (satisfaction/dissatisfaction) of special education schools in which their children are enrolled in (Research Questions 1-4), and
- Questions 15-17 are open-ended and are designed to elicit participant perspectives of how such specialist services can be improved (Research Question 5). The responses from parents are labelled, A, B, or C in the qualitative data summary section, and correspond with questions, 15,16, and 17 respectively.

Figure 1: items and scales adopted for the study
Four key components were addressed through the survey constructs: constructs designed to elicit the perspectives of parents, guardians, and carers concerning the extent to which teacher-parent collaboration contributes to

(a) understanding about special educational needs;
(b) willingness to communicate in matters pertaining to special educational needs;
(c) their perceived roles in implementing special educational needs; and
(d) expectations of each other's role in implementing special educational needs and their degree of satisfaction with the experiences at their school.

The survey data has been analysed, to generate in the first instance, descriptive statistics consisting of mean scores ranked from the highest level to the lowest level from the perspectives of the participants.

The open-ended items have been analysed thematically to underline respondent views on the issues, concerns and successes in terms of their child's enrolment at special schools. A set of theoretical propositions or perspectives, reflecting the deeper insights of participants (Strauss & Glaser, 1967) has been generated through the data analysis. It is anticipated that these perspectives will be instructive to policy writers, teachers, and leaders of schools and early learning centres who are actively engaged with SWD.

The structure of the survey and its alignment to the research questions is shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: items and scales adopted for the study

Question/ Item Number(s)	Details	Target/ Outcome Variable Measure	Research Questions Addressed	Type of Data Form: Quantitative	Type of Data Form: Qualitative
1-5	Demographic variables (namely, 'Year Level' of enrolled child(ren); 'State/ Territory in Australia of enrolled child(ren); 'sector' of enrolled child(ren); the 'child's primary disability'; and the 'level of support of enrolled child(ren)	Demographic variables of study	✓	✓ (item '5' has an 'open-ended' option too)	(item '4' has an 'open-ended' option too)
6-7	'Type' and 'frequency' of educational support of enrolled child(ren)	Respondent satisfaction/ dissatisfaction towards services rendered by special schools	1	✓ (item '7' has an 'open-ended' option too)	
8, 10, 11	Understanding and recognition of enrolled child(ren)'s 'strengths' and 'needs'	✓	2		
9, 12	'Accommodations' and/ or 'modifications' to the curriculum expectations that's in place to support the enrolled child(ren)	✓	3		
13, 14	'Access to technology and other programs and services' in place to support the enrolled child(ren)	✓	4		
15	'What is being done well to support' the enrolled child(ren)'s disability and additional learning and support needs	Respondent perspectives of how such specialist services can be improved	5		✓
16	'Helping' the enrolled child(ren) 'to be more successful at school'		5		✓
17	'Other comments'		5		✓

Ethics

In line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (The National Health & Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Universities Australia, 2018), an application was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University for clearance. Once approval was gained at the national level the research team then applied to each educational jurisdiction across Australia for further approval to conduct the study. (ACU-2019-144E, Appendix 6 (i)) Access to this group of students and their caregivers was not without issue for the researchers. While the purpose and integrity of the study was not in question, there was a level of additional scrutiny given by each jurisdiction, system and sectors that needed to be considered to gain approval to conduct the survey. The research team were mindful that the study coincided with the 'Disability Royal Commission' and therefore this may have added to the additional level of scrutiny. Just as the study began we collided with a worldwide pandemic and over the duration access and participation have needed longer timelines to accommodate all. The researchers also note that in most states and territories specialist education facilities have not closed during the pandemic, but remained open to all students, being classed as essential services.

Once ethics clearance had been granted, the following sets of documents, were forwarded first to the school Principal inviting their school into the research project and asking the Principal to invite parents, guardians, and carers to participate in the survey. The materials included the following: the 'Principal Information Letter' and 'Consent Form' (Appendix 2), the 'Participant Information Letter' and 'Consent Form' (Appendix 3), a copy of the 'Research Proposal', a copy of the 'Research Instrument [Online Survey]', a copy of the 'ASEPA Support Letter' (Appendix 4), and a copy of the ethics clearances, as applicable (Appendices 5-16 and in the order, as above).

The consenting Principal, in turn, forwarded the necessary 'Participant Information Letter' and 'Consent Form' to the parents, guardians, and carers of the students enrolled in their school, requesting them to participant in the study. Participant informed consent was obtained within the scope of the online survey that hosted a 'yes'/'no' question eliciting approval to partake in the survey.

A full set of all Appendices for the Ethics section of this report can be found at www.asepa.edu.au

![MUTED VOICES logo]

Study Sample

As of the data extraction date for final analysis, the online survey tool recorded a total of 519 responses, of which, 504 individuals consented to participate. However, the number of fully completed responses reveals a reduced size and it is concluded that the sample size for the study is 390.

Demographic and close-ended (Likert-type) quantitative data forms were analysed using a frequency (percentage) analysis. For open-ended items the data were analysed using constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Glaser, 1967). The constant comparative method is a data coding process used for categorising and comparing qualitative data for research analysis. Data were imported into Microsoft Excel which were then coded in as many categories as possible, integrated into short categories, and finally categorised into perspectives.

Figure 2 below, highlights the year level of the students enrolled in the special school setting at the time of the survey administration. Year 7 recorded the highest percentage of SWD (11%) followed by Years 3 and 12 (10% each), with all other year levels below the 10% mark.

Figure 2: Year level of the enrolled SWD in the special school setting

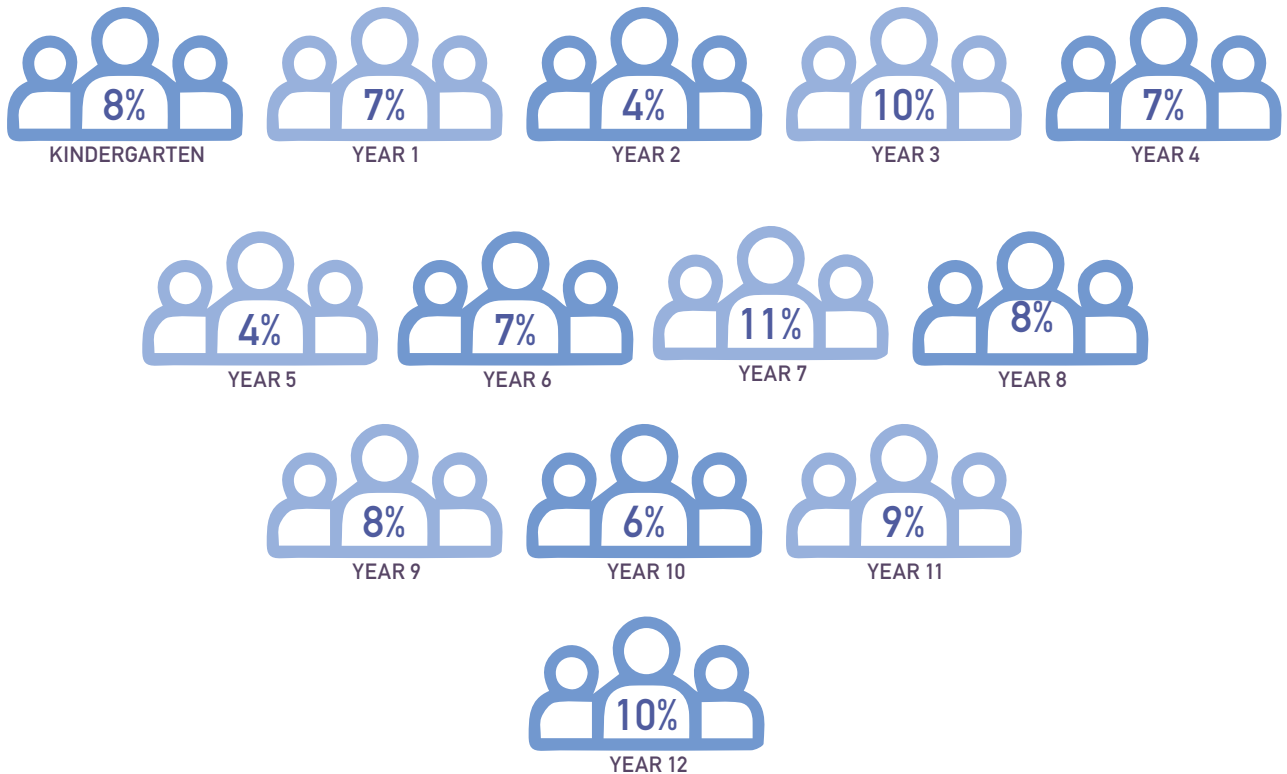| 8% KINDERGARTEN | 7% YEAR 1 | 4% YEAR 2 | 10% YEAR 3 | 7% YEAR 4 |
4% YEAR 5	7% YEAR 6	11% YEAR 7	8% YEAR 8	
8% YEAR 9	6% YEAR 10	9% YEAR 11		
10% YEAR 12				

Figure 3 portrays the enrolled student's primary disability as reported by the parent participants. Autism Spectrum Disorder was noted as posing the highest incidence of a diagnosed disability (39%), followed by Intellectual Disability and 'other' identified types as reported by parents of the SWD (27% each). Physical Disability and Speech and Language Disability, as the child/children's primary disability, was reported at 5% and 2%, respectively.

Figure 3:The Enrolled Student's Primary Disability
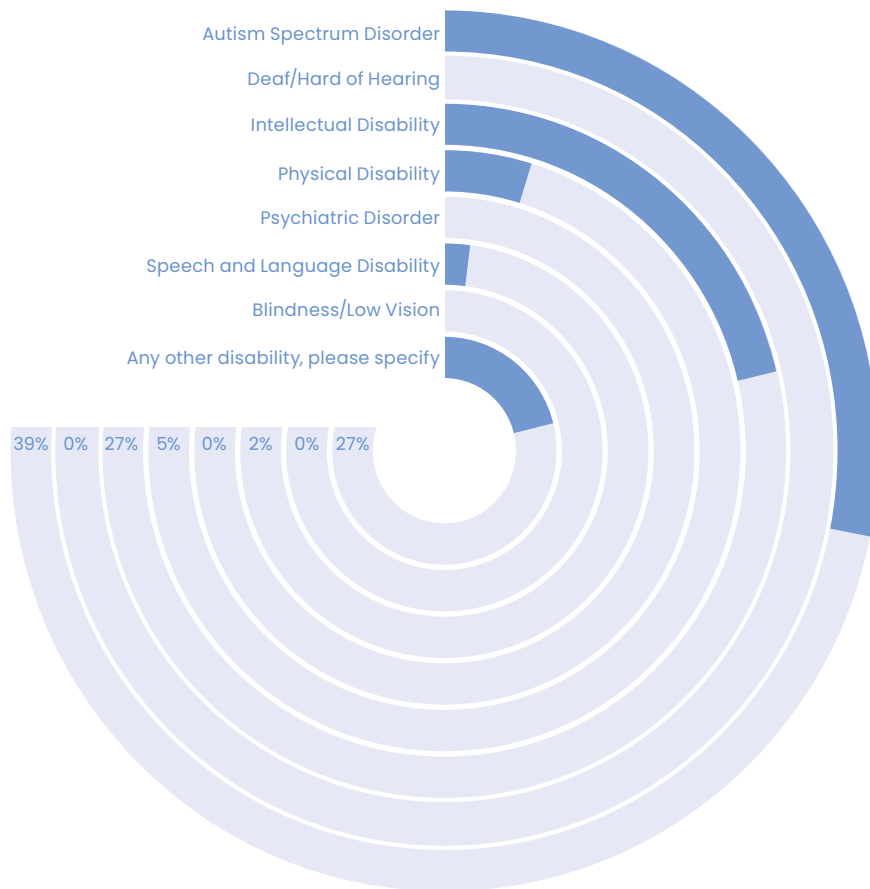
Findings

Quantitative Data Summary

The research intention has the following outcome – to provide information from families in special schools on curriculum and other school practices that add value to the learning experiences of SWD. The results of survey 6 - 14 are listed in figures 4 - 12 , and a brief analysis follows.

Figure 4: The Type Of Educational Support That The Enrolled SWD In The Special School Setting Receives

Extremely satisfied

Slightly satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Slightly dissatisfied
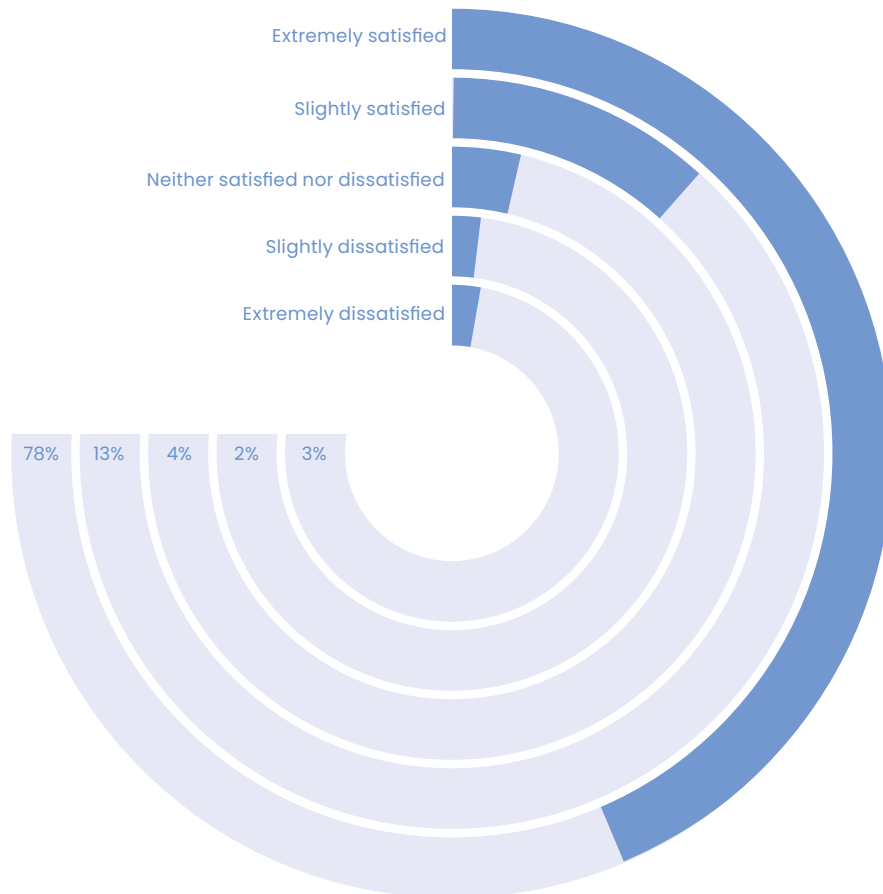
Extremely dissatisfied

78% 13% 4% 2% 3%

Figure 4 highlights the degree of satisfaction expressed by parents, guardians, and carers regarding the type of educational support their child received at the time of the survey administration. 91% of the respondents concurred that they are satisfied with the type of educational support that their children receive in their special school setting.

Figure 5 highlights the satisfaction of participants towards the frequency of educational support that their child received at the time of the survey administration. The majority of respondents, 73% of the obtained responses, concurred that they are satisfied with the frequency of educational support. 12% of the respondents expressed the desire for more personalised interventions in place to support student learning and development.

Similarly, 10% and 2% of the responding participants, respectively, wanted more support from a teaching assistant and/or an itinerant support teacher in the classroom. 4% of the responding participants, noting for the 'Other (please specify)' category, expressed a need for:

- more personalised interventions that would equip the student with "more life/social skills" (for example, physiotherapy, speech, occupational therapy),
- continued equity funding from the government towards SSPs, and
- recognition of dyslexia in special schools in Australia.

Figure 5 : The frequency of Educational support that the enrolled SWD in the special school setting receives

We are pleased with the services provided

We wish there was more support from a School Learning and Support Officer or Teacher Aide/ Teaching Assistant in the classroom

We wish there was more support from an itinerant support teacher

We wish there were some personalised interventions designed for my child's needs

Other (please specify)

73%   10%   2%   12%   4%
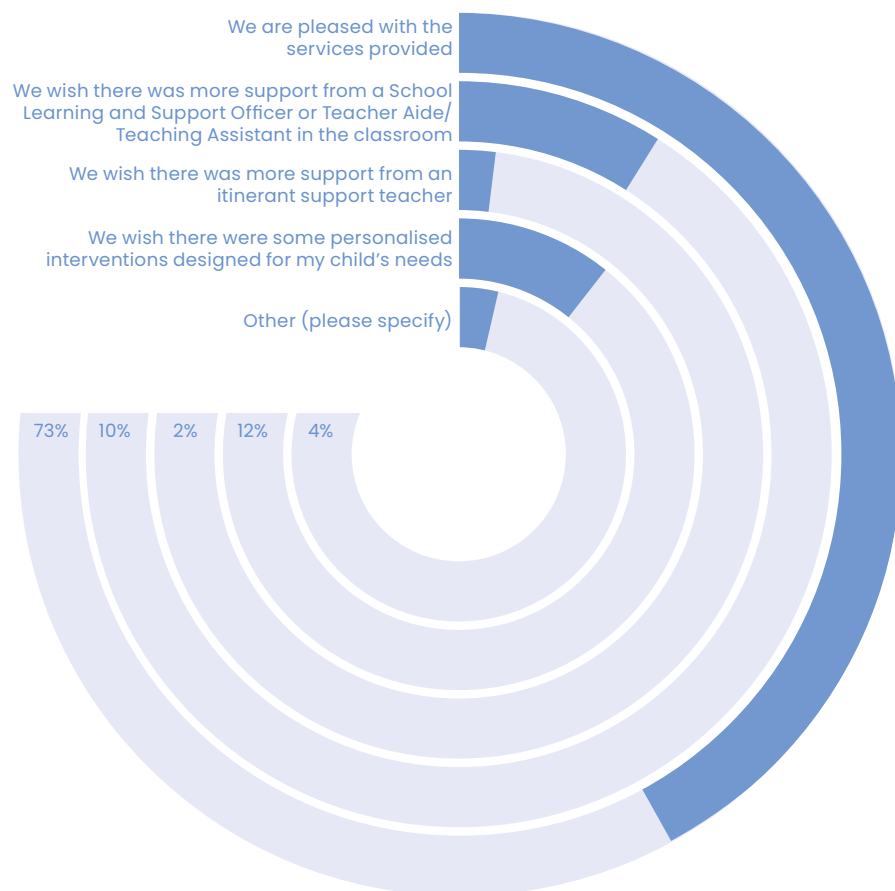
Figure 6: Strengths and needs that the enrolled SWD in the special school setting receives

Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
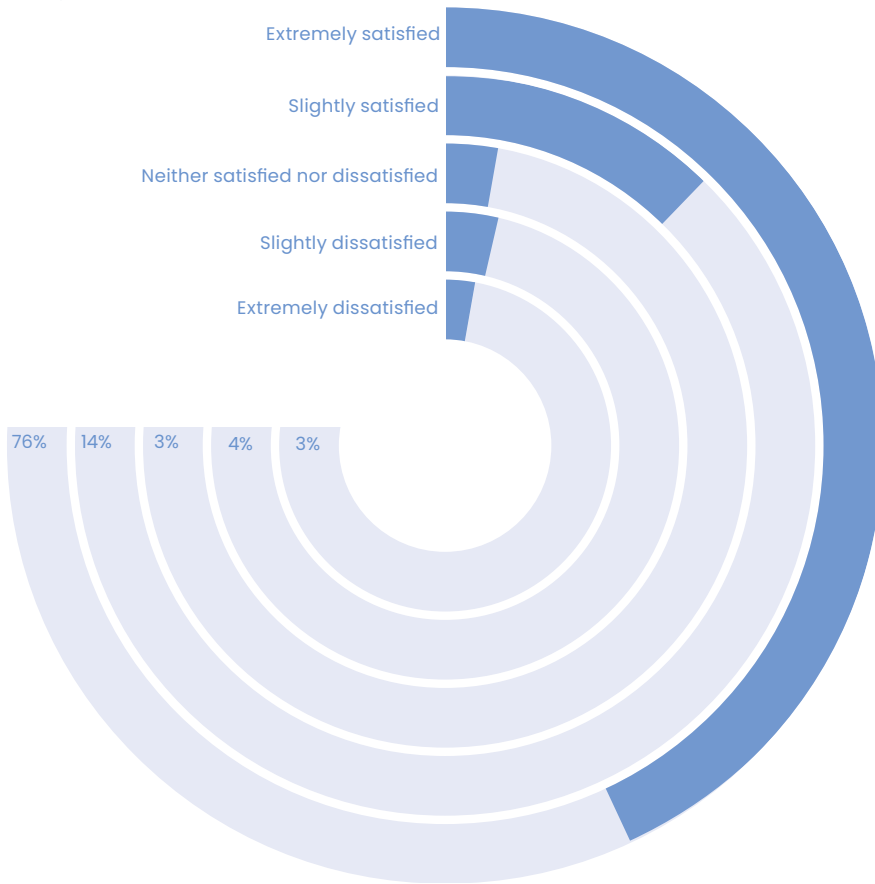Extremely dissatisfied

76%   14%   3%   4%   3%

Figure 6 highlights the satisfaction of the participants regarding the overall understanding of strengths and needs of their child in special school settings at the time of the survey administration. 90% of the respondents concurred that they are satisfied with the institution's overall understanding of their child/children's strengths and needs in the special school setting.

Figure 7: Opportunity to provide information to the special school setting regarding SWD strengths and needs

Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
I don't recall being asked to provide information
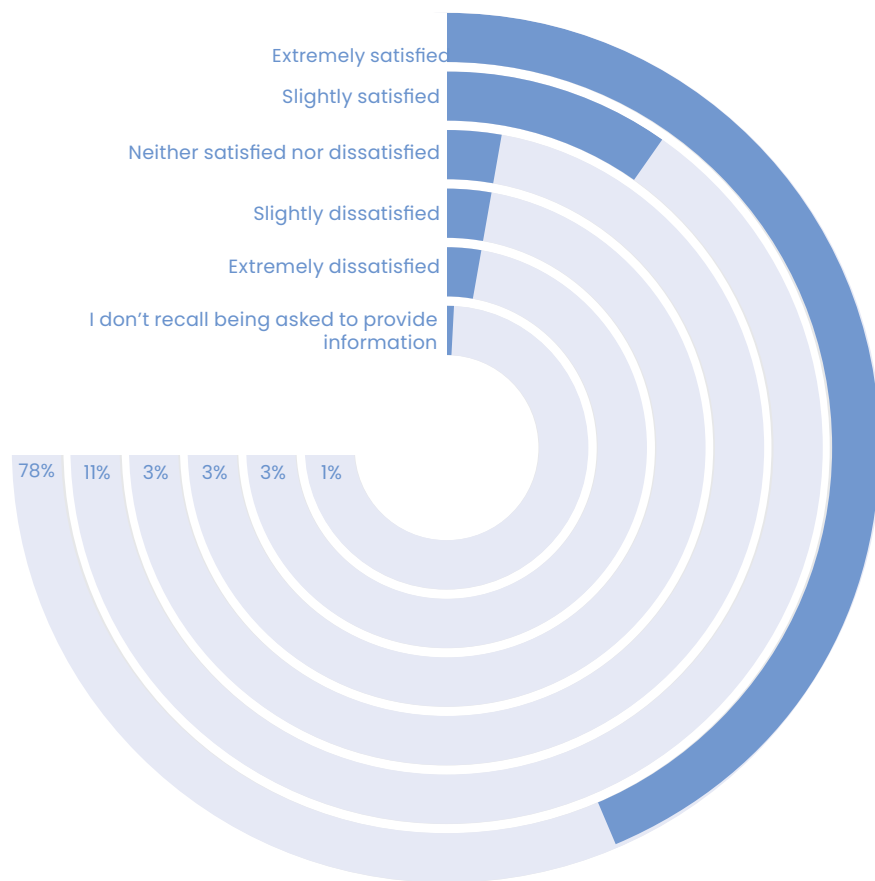
78%   11%   3%   3%   3%   1%

Figure 7 highlights the satisfaction of respondants regarding the opportunity to provide information to the special school about their child's strengths and needs at the time of the survey administration. A majority of 89% expressed satisfaction with the opportunity to provide information about their child/children's strengths and needs in the special school setting. A small percentage of the participants (6%) recorded concerns in this category. Noteworthy is, 1% of participants could not recall the school asking for such information about their children.

Figure 8: Accommodation and/or modification to the curriculum developed through the individual education plan (IEP)

Extremely satisfied

Slightly satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Slightly dissatisfied

Extremely dissatisfied

It is difficult for me to understand my child's IEP
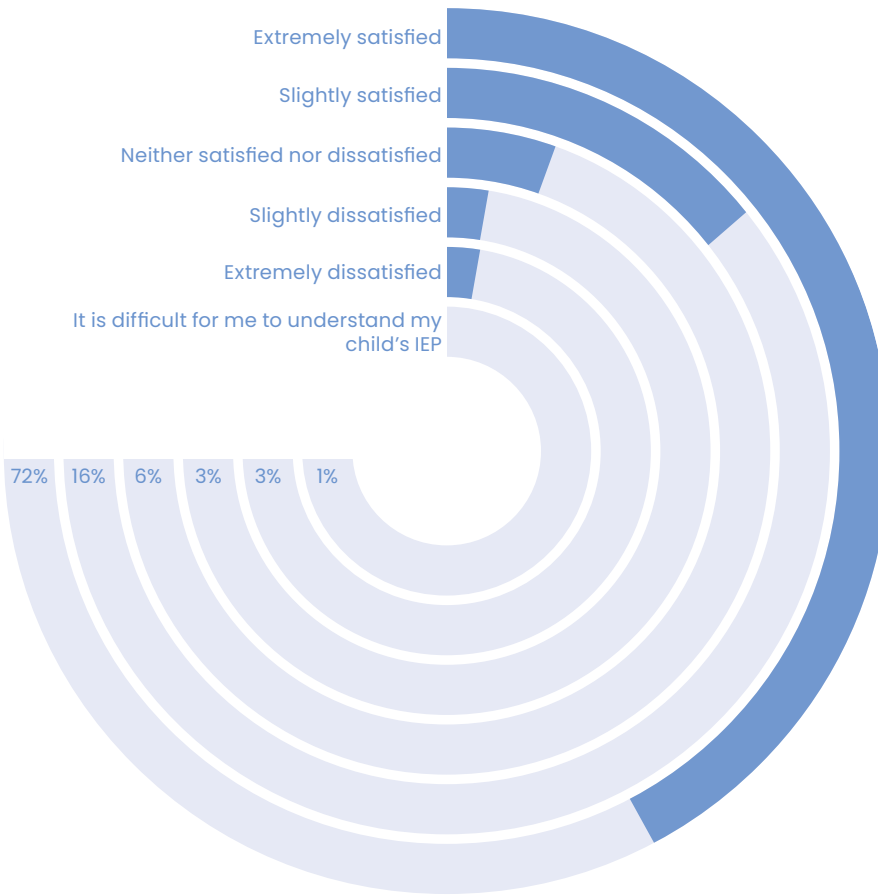
72%   16%   6%   3%   3%   1%

Figure 8 provides insights into the satisfaction of participants towards the special school's efforts to develop self-advocacy skills. The development of self-advocacy skills, as explained in the survey, present opportunities for students to be able to tell others what they need to do to help themselves to be successful at school. 73% of the respondents communicated through the survey that they are satisfied with the school's efforts to develop self-advocacy skills of the enrolled child/children. While only 5% of participants claimed a level of dissatisfaction, 14% of the respondents recorded that their child struggles to explain to others what he/she needs to be successful at school.

Figure 9: The special school's efforts to developing self-advocacy skills for the enrolled SWD

Extremely satisfied

Slightly satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Slightly dissatisfied

Extremely dissatisfied

My child struggles to explain to others what he/she needs to be successful at school
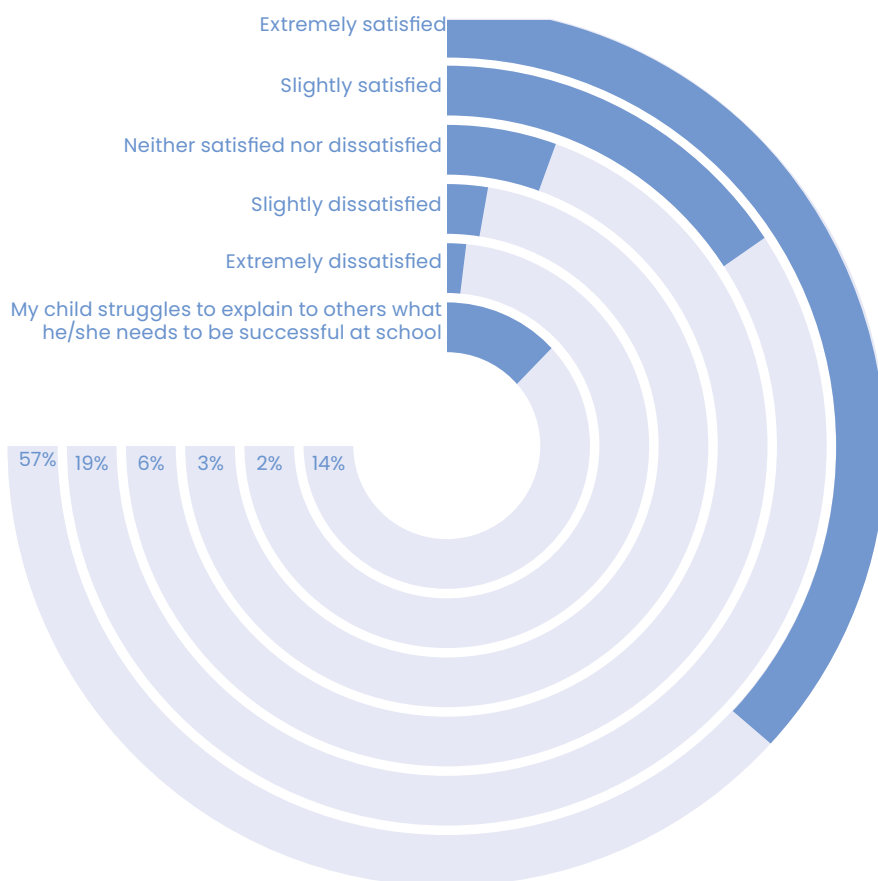
57%   19%   6%   3%   2%   14%

Figure 9 highlights the satisfaction of parent, guardian, and carer of the SWD towards the accommodations or the modifications to the curriculum that has been developed through the IEP for their child. 89% of the participants expressed a view that they were extremely satisfied or slightly satisfied with the accommodations or the modifications to the curriculum that have been developed through the IEP.

Figure 10: Special school setting around meeting the goals in the individual education plan (IEP) for SWD

Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
I would like more regular contact with the school about my child's progress
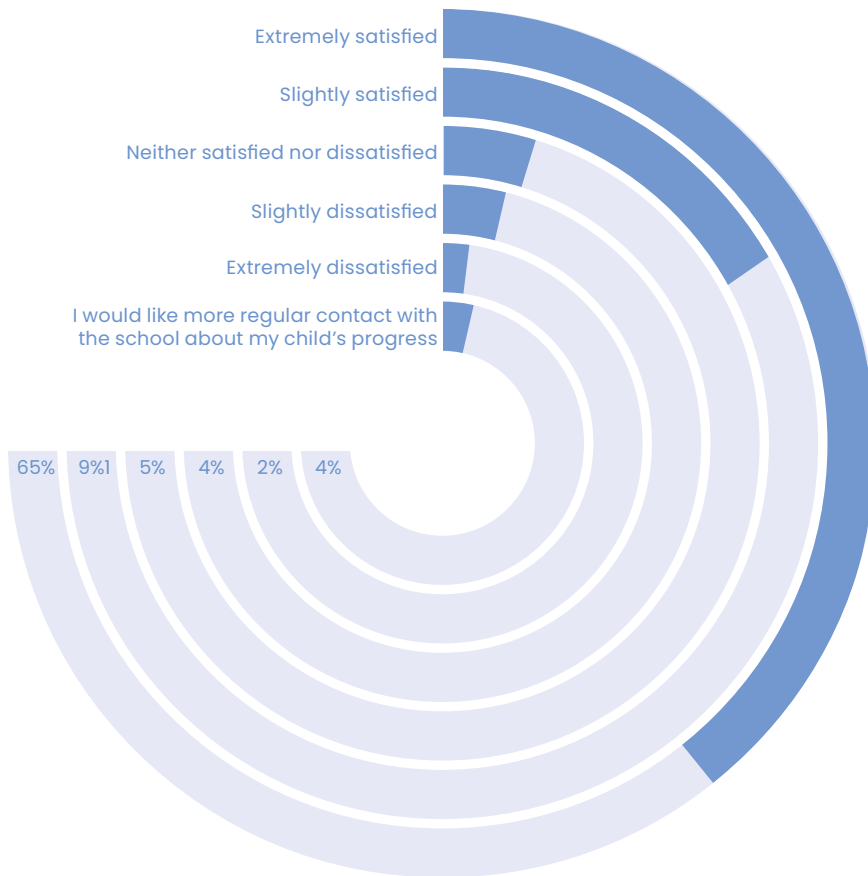
65% 9% 1% 5% 4% 2% 4%

Figure 10 highlights the degree of satisfaction expressed by participants towards the amount of information received about their child's progress in meeting their IEP goals. 84% of respondents were extremely satisfied or slightly satisfied with the amount of information received.

Figure 11: Access to technology for the enrolled SWD in the special school setting

Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
Unsure of what technology my child has access to at school
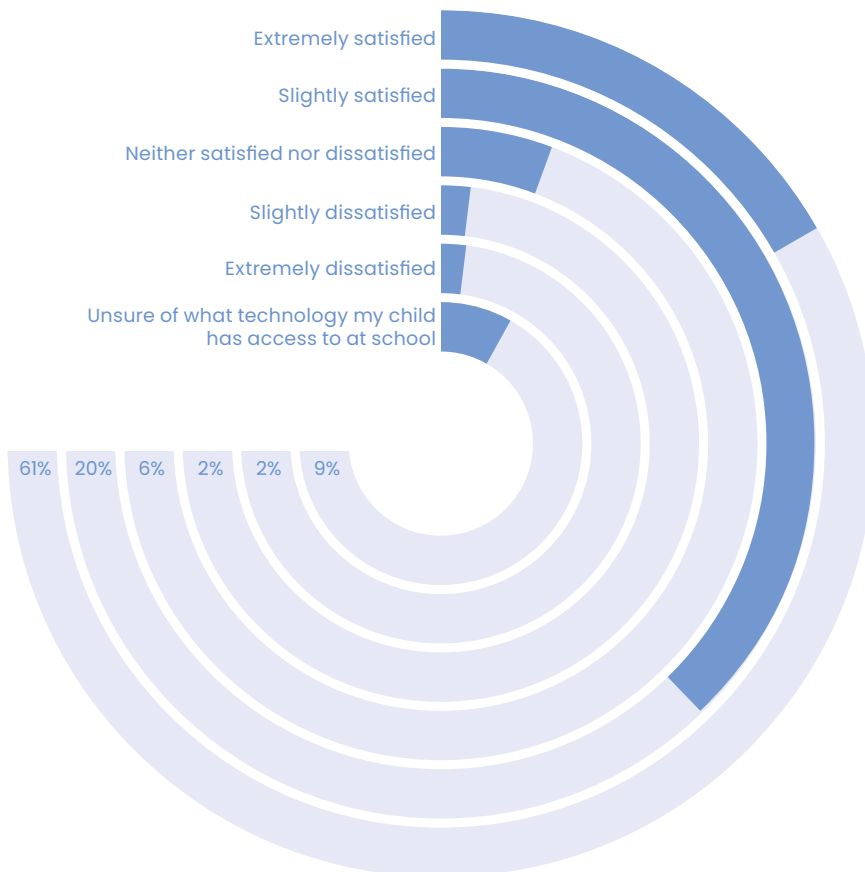
61% 20% 6% 2% 2% 9%

Figure 11 highlights the satisfaction of participants concerning the student's access to technology in the special school setting. Technology, in this instance, as explained in the survey pertained to computer/Chromebook, an iPad, Google Read and Write and/ or similar resources. 81% expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the opportunities for students to access technology in their learning programs. A small minority of parents were unsure of what technology their child has access to, in the special school setting.

Figure 12: Access to programs and services for the enrolled SWD in the special school setting

Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
Unsure of what services my child may have access to
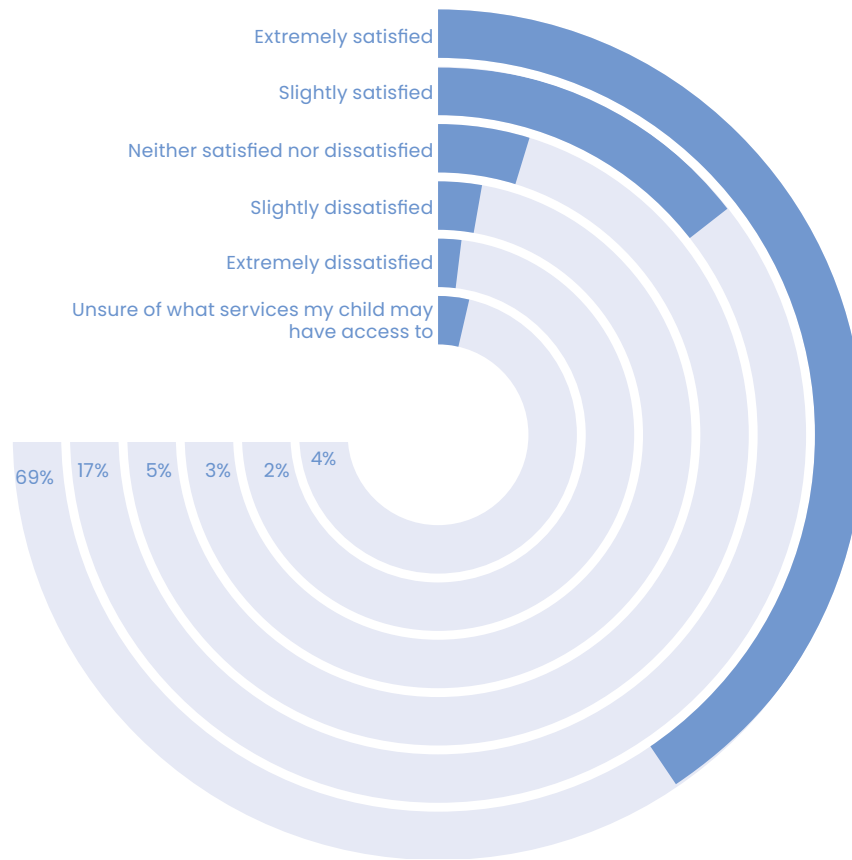
69% 17% 5% 3% 2% 4%

Figure 12 highlight the satisfaction of respondents regarding student access to various programs and services in the special school setting. 86% of the respondents were extremely satisfied or slightly satisfied while a small minority of parents (4%) were unsure of what programs and services their child has access to. Reasons for this perspective were not voiced at this point but are made more evident in the qualitative responses that follow.

The above analysis is from the data collected from survey items 6 to 14. It is evident that the perspectives of respondents that there are high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by special schools in Australia, although there is a small percentage of parents who sit outside these levels of satisfaction. The next section brings a further level of understanding to the data through the analysis of the open-ended questions.

Qualitative Data Summary

This section presents an analysis of the open-ended questions that were at the close of the survey. The three survey questions were:

- Q15 - In your opinion, what is being done well at school to support your child's disability and additional learning and support needs?
- Q16 - In your opinion, how can we help your child to be more successful at school?
- Q17 - Other comments.

As stated earlier, the open-ended items have been analysed to capture respondent perspectives on the issues, concerns, and successes inherent in the process of

collaboration and engagement that they have experienced in terms of their child's enrolment at special schools. The perspectives of the parents are listed below under each of the three questions and generate the findings of the study. A total of seven perspectives have been generated from the data.

Question 15

Three key perspectives are reported from the respondents as to what is being done well at school to enhance the students' additional learning and support needs.

- 1. My special school supports my child in developing life skills;
- 2. My special school provides a safe and nurturing learning environment for my child;
- 3. There is effective communication between my school and my family.

1. Such real-world life skills encompass but are not limited to working to a routine and self-regulation, toilet training, learning safety procedures, sensory play, group activities, and nurturing individual interests and aspirations whilst also conforming to the curricular requirements. There was overwhelming collective support from the respondents for this outcome.

> Respondent A34 reports:
> *My child receives an extremely high standard of care and her independence and well-being is supported in countless ways. Things that stand out particularly include communication support and teaching, support for her medical needs, support to access physiotherapy at school.*

Respondent A68 affirms the staff in their school by stating *that the teachers have our child's best interests in their forefront, and we couldn't be happier with them*

There were numerous comments such as the following that reflect parental satisfaction with the level of support offered to their child:

- *Staff are excellent at tailoring everything to suit my child's abilities, issues and needs. All done in a caring and loving way (A79)*
- *The teachers support her in every way possible and are always going above and beyond to make sure (the child) is cared for and learning everything needed (A89)*
- *The staff have amazing patience, understanding and time for my child. They go out of their way to accommodate her needs every day. (A80)*

Participants generated a view that curriculum requirements are largely met by appropriate modifications or scaffolding tailored to meet the needs of the student, particularly targeting literacy and numeracy development.

Respondent A2 noted that *(They are) quality people implementing quality programmes. The school environment is safe and nurturing and expectations are fair and consistent*

across all areas of the school. In a similar vein Respondent A94 reported: *Our sons schooling is very tailored to his learning style, from equipment to the amazing staff and their personal knowledge of our son.*

Likewise, the survey respondents were of the view that the school specifically caters to the development of appropriate social skills and social networking interactions on an individual basis for their children. Respondent A3 expressed an affirming sentiment that was reflected by many other parents in her recognition of staff in special schools who focus on… *life skills, confidence building, encouraging, and supporting my child's own personal interests and dreams.*

Many respondents argued that the focus on social skills in the students, nurtures not only their confidence and abilities, but also presents opportunities to realistically meet their goals, aspirations, and dreams.

As one parent reports: *The teaching of life skills will provide my son with opportunities when he leaves school. (A58)*

The focus on individuality and understanding of the student's particular needs, as articulated by the respondents, is instrumental to further their learning, for example, in the areas of speech, reading, and writing development.

One parent (A19) claims: *(I value) the very personal approach …needed for my child to succeed and to continue moving forward in his learning.*
In a similar manner another (A23) reports: *He is well cared for in all aspects of his learning and supported to achieve his learning goals within his capacity*

Further, parents acknowledge that individual educational planning fosters meaningful cognitive, emotional, and positive behavioural development. This in turn, enables the students to experience a sense of belonging and independence which encourages *student confidence and self esteem as (they) can see results in (their) learning capabilities (A56).* Extra support from principals and school leaders, as reported by the respondents, often allows the working staff in special school settings to go *beyond the available resources (A37)* to ensuring that every child gains basic life skills and capabilities *within a wonderful culture of inclusion (A11).*

2. Survey respondents were of the view that special schools are the best fit for their child for several reasons.
   The staff are doing a wonderful job (A3)
Respondents provided a variety of explanations why such schools are deemed more appropriate when compared to mainstream schools in terms of the support for their family and child. A very convincing sentiment was expressed by respondent A13;
   The amount of experience the teachers have with teaching kids with special needs is obvious to us, as we have noticed a remarkable improvement in our child's behaviour

and learning in just this first 3 terms... They really know how to manage these kids and modify their teaching to get them to actually learn and participate.

The reasons included but were not limited to the following:

Staff were knowledgeable across a range of disabilities. Parents comments included the following:
- *Staff are specialized in dealing with all types of disability (A25)*
- *All the teachers are incredibly well trained with special needs (A66)*
- *All of the staff are trained to teach or support children with disabilities. They have not only the passion but the skills and knowledge to help my child achieve her*
- *potential (A88)*

Staff are characterised as knowledgeable, caring, empathetic, professional, skilled, and working with a myriad of trained support staff, including teachers, teacher aides, visiting specialist teachers, Learning Support Officers, volunteers, and assistants. Parents held staff in high esteem as can be witnessed in the following responses:
- *Staff are excellent, attentive and empathetic (A50)*
- *We are engaged with caring well educated staff who can look past the behaviours to the skills beneath (A65) and know how to teach my child (A283)*
- *The excellent qualifications of staff, their patience with difficult students and the overall friendly atmosphere they create in the school reflects why things are being done well at our school. (A207, A248, A25)*
- *The teachers (in our school) are so skilled and understanding (A226)*
- *We have great teachers who have the best interests of our children in the forefront of their minds – we couldn't be happier (A287)*

Staff provided individualized programs that cater to the individual learning needs of the SWD. Programs included personalised education plans, behavioural support plans, and the provision of emotional support for families and the child.

There were many differing reasons why the focus on individual learning was deemed important for many parents across a broad range of contexts. These included the following statements of support for teachers and their tireless efforts to provide programs of learning that were based on the unique needs of each child :
- *We value as a family the individualised learning plan in a classroom that accommodates her needs, with only a small number of students in the class and excellent teacher support (A327)*
- *Everything that is being done at the school is both benefiting and helping my daughter to thrive.*
- *She is amongst her peers and is in a safe and caring environment.*
- *She is taught at her level and is supported with all her needs, goals, and requirements. (A329)*
- *Our sons schooling is very tailored to his learning style, from equipment to the*

amazing staffand their personal knowledge of our son

- *(Our son) is being treated as an individual with unique needs- there is no attempt to try a one size fits all method (A255)*
- *We appreciate program consistency, and that staff are open to individual learning challenges and its implications (A237)*
- *I find that the programs in our school are tailored for individual and group learning. The curriculum is modified to core strengths and developed to grow with each student (A206)*
- *I respect the effort that teachers make regarding individual goals, excellent teaching practices, excellent reporting system, (and) great resources to meet his individual learning needs (A203)*

Staff and teams provide an extensive range of support to every child through the inclusion and integration of the following:

(i) medical supports and programs, rebound therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy, music therapy, allied health; One parent states:

My child receives an extremely high standard of care and her independence and well being is supported in countless ways. Things that stand out particularly include communication support and teaching, support for her medical needs, (and) support to access physiotherapy at school. (A239)

(ii) a range of Early Intervention [EI] programs, including emotional toolbox, Google Classroom, Mobility Opportunities Via Education/Experience [MOVE], Picture Exchange Communication System [PECS], Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display [PODD]; Parents are of the view that …as the following quote can validate.

We are so pleased that he is at such a wonderful school including our child's therapists such as speech and occupational therapy…we are very happy with how our child is being supported. We feel that they work hard to help our child reach their education goals and that this is done in a safe environment where he feels comfortable to learn and grow (A184)

(iii) Positive Behaviour Support [PBS];
The teachers at my school have a good understanding of my child's condition and the fact that he is not just a number. I value the specialised programs like TEACHH, the use of AAC, PECS, and PODD to develop his communication. He is supported by behaviour intervention methods by support staff who understand his needs. He is given Literacy and Numeracy support as well as social support in the playground. (A240)

(iv) Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children [TEACCH Autism Program]); Supportive families express sentiments such as the following:

• My son has complex behavioural issues, severe limitations around communication, and a number of other challenges. The school acknowledges, understands and addresses the issues and areas of concern, offer support with staff, and scaffold where necessary (A70)

• My daughter has additional help from her teachers in her class. They are aware of her sensory needs, the pool sessions on site are of great help as well. The small class size, the specific and special care provided in a special school setting is exactly what my daughter needs and is done very well at her current special school (A134)

(v) appropriate technology and resources. One parent asks for her child to have greater access to more advanced technologies such as the eye-gaze program (A95).

By way of a summary the following sentiment captures the overwhelming support expressed by parents that special schools meet the unique needs of their child.

We are extremely happy with the level of support for our dear son through (named) school… We feel that there is a very good understanding by the school of his support needs (and)we see our child reaching his education goals (A184)

Some respondents commented specifically on the concept of the integrated classroom in reference to the school's physical and educational curriculum offerings. They recounted that *adapting the learning environment and the curriculum (A297)* together with the presence of appropriate amenities and infrastructure, and a broad, diverse, and interesting curriculum are great assets that are integral to special school settings *and foster an inclusive and supportive environment (A72)*. Further, they noted that small class sizes (A78), interactive and play-based learning (A240) , and experiential development programs (A277) enhanced engagement and outcomes for their child.

Teachers provide every opportunity for each child to succeed to the best of their abilities…they also look for the best learning programs for each child (A89). The parents argued that these strategies and resources are often completely missing or not made available in a mainstream setting. As one parent states *(A101): My child has been fully supported in a special needs school for all her schooling and there would not be enough support in a mainstream setting. She loves being with her people.*

The overwhelming majority of the respondents posited that the special school at which their child is enrolled is doing a great job. *Special school – it's the best place for my son (A87).* Mainstream settings, according to some of the respondents, often ignore the conditions that are integral to special schools, particularly personalised one-on-on care and the priority to accommodating the safety needs of the child that is extremely crucial and contributory to the holistic development of SWD.

One parent recounts:

Our daughter's disability is very complex. The small classroom setting with a teacher and support team provide her with the correct level of support and attention. Our daughter would not be able to follow the "mainstream" curriculum and the school supports her well with her adapted curriculum (A63).

Another states:

My child is safe, (she) has friends which she may not have in a mainstream school. She is cared for and feels that she belongs in her special school setting (A90).

Special school settings, according to some of the respondents, cater for the needs of the students in *an evidence-based manner (A234) , with the staff cognizant of and open to the individual learning challenges of each student (A239).*

A marginal fraction of the respondents, however, commented on the underlying bureaucracy and red tape as impeding special schools serving their communities more effectively e.g., The school access and utilise everything they possibly can but are *held back by funding and red tape (A65).* Such respondents were of the perspective that, in view of the gamut of resources that special schools need to function effectively and efficiently, processes should be in place to streamline funding opportunities.

These parents were very satisfied with the experiences their children encountered in the special setting but were aware of the frustrations for staff in regard to sustained and improved funding. Likewise, some of the survey respondents, (e.g., A282) stressed the importance of offering Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses as a further means to enhancing post-school employment options for the students in special schools.

3. Many parents stated that it is the effective communication between the school and themselves that guarantees and ensures meeting the needs of their child. Parents stated emphatically and collectively that regular and consistent communication initiatives have been integral to monitor the progress, needs, and goals of their child's learning and development. Parental support is captured in this expression of affirmation: *The teacher takes the time to listen to parents and therapists and understands each child individually to help further their learning (A94).*

Another parent comments that their most valued experience with the school is the one on one time spent with their child's teacher (A96), while another (A108) *prioritizes the communication between school, teachers and parents* as the most valued experience with their school. Parent A193 reported that *the teacher is responsive to emails and always welcomes communication from me as the parent.* A more fulsome response from Respondent A105 celebrates the communication between the teacher and parents and claims *it is crucial to my child's learning and behavioural needs Another values the daily update towards progress (A259).*

Augmentative communication strategies, as perceived by a number of the respondents (e.g., A162. A173, A182) are reflective of the school culture, one that promotes and fosters interaction about all levels of educational and social ability. Parent A150 values the school being in constant touch with parents and appreciates access to timely discussions with teachers through the communication books and telephone calls. Individual planning meetings, on the other hand, are also highlighted by some of the respondents (e.g., A155, A171, A203, A214, A222, A235, A245, A269) as equally effective when they are held regularly with targets reviewed frequently. One parent elaborated that the school is *great at working and communicating with parents to form individual plans (A242).*

By way of summary A270 claims that *communication with our teachers is excellent so I know exactly what he is doing and what I can do at home to support his learning. Communication is the key (A280).*

While some parents expressed minor concerns about regular communication (A129, A320) , they did reiterate that their school could overcome these through increasingly more positive home school partnerships (A91, A134, A172, A257, A10) with a commitment to further the child's learning and support.
Based on the perspectives of the participants, therefore, it can be concluded that the overall school community in each school is deemed to be extremely helpful and supportive in facilitating the success of students and in assisting the students to achieve at their level and/or capacity. Parental involvement, in the opinion of the respondents, plays a vital role in goal setting and review and they state that any issues that arise, can be negated by way of effective communication between the school and themselves.

Based on the perspectives of the respondents as reiterated above, the following findings were captured:
- Australian Special Schools offer holistic support, care, creativity, empathy, enthusiasm, flexibility, and passionate, patience teachers.
- The attention provided by expert staff set within a context that is specialised in its physical constructs, promotes learning engagement and mutual respect and is highly valued by parents.
- The inclusive learning environment that is at the heart of the school promotes consistent learning and support, and this provides the opportunity for the children to feel safe and welcome in such a setting.

Question 16
Three additional perspectives emerged from the respondents as to what can be done for SWD to be more successful at Australian Special Schools.
- 4: Schools, are already doing a good job in terms of the support and care provided towards the learning and the holistic development of their child;
- 5: Schools are deemed as being the best fit for their child, however, there is also a need for continuing improvement; and
- 6: School funding needs to be sustained or increased for a variety of reasons to sustain the quality of education for SWD.

4. An overwhelming majority of proponents reported that special schools' staff are already doing a good job in terms of the support and care towards the learning and the holistic development of their child.

Respondents were enthusiastic in their support for teachers and schools. A sample of the responses is shared below:

- *Continue to do what you are doing (B14)*
- *Keep doing as they are doing right now and my child will thrive, my child loves going to school (B16)*
- *I think my child is getting the best support already (B54)*
- *My child is successful- due to the dedication and skills of the excellent teaching and administrative staff in an appropriate and highly tailored environment (B58)*
- *My son is successful based on the education that he has been provided by a specialized disability school. No other school could provide the type of care and support that he has been given over the years (B124).*
- *My son has nothing but good things to say about his school- he has never been happier (B 173)*
- *What is currently provided is fantastic (B252)*
- *The school already exceeds my expectations - there is nothing else I can think of that the school isn't already doing (B310).*

Many of the respondents, however, expressed concern that special schools may close and be replaced by mainstreaming into general classrooms or schools. One parent (B178) makes a plea to *keep special schools open* based on the argument that their son would not cope in mainstream schooling. The respondent continues:

We believe that these children have a right to attend a special school and it is discrimination to insist that our child goes to mainstream…if we were forced into mainstream, we would have no choice but to home school our son which would mean he wasn't able to have a full (and) meaningful education…Please don't force us into mainstream, we won't cope and it will be an unfair change for us to go through.

Parent B178 concludes with the question: *Isn't it every child's right to a full meaningful education in an environment where you are properly supported with your education?* This passionate plea is reflected across the data in more succinct responses such as the following:

- *Please keep our special school instead of moving students to mainstream classrooms, provide more support and resources to special schools …to help my child and other children with disabilities to be more successful at school (B86)*
- *Keep special schools running and fully support them (B97, B209, B210, B 215,).*
- *Give the school more funding for better implementation (B103, B114, B115. B126, B130*
- *B137, B165,).*
- *Keep special schools open, as my child would not cope in a mainstream class*
- *room (B175).*
- *Ensure the continuity of these schools and their extremely important place in society*

and the education of complex needs children (B206)
- *Don't close special schools – those who know their children best need to be able to choose which school will best suit their children's needs – not everyone will succeed in mainstream schools. (B309).*

Parents are cognisant of inclusive education policies that were *pushing for the integration of their child into mainstream settings (B56).* They strongly voiced that there is no substitute for the knowledge, skills, and the rich repertoire of support and training that Australian special school staff currently demonstrate and continue to develop in meeting the educational and developmental needs of children with disabilities. In fact, a section of the respondents strongly argued for the *establishment of more special schools (B32, B86, B130) and more specifically trained teachers (B26, B50, B86, B99) and support staff (B39, B116)* in order to provide the necessary support and care towards the learning and the holistic development of SWD.

Concerns were also expressed by a section of the respondents that mainstreaming often lacks the proper integration and understanding of the complex needs of SWD. As one parent reports, *everything is a challenge for my son and being in a class with other kids in a big school does not give him the level of learning that will help with life after or outside of school (B172).* We believe that *sending our child into mainstream is cruel and a huge backward step in 2020 (B178).* Misunderstandings regarding the complex needs of SWD overtly portrays the importance of special schools and the qualified personnel appointed to special schools. One parent argues that the transition of their child into mainstream classes would *lead to sensory overload among other things* and recommends that special schools be granted *increased government funding to be able to meet the ranges of disability levels as children grow (B238).* The importance of special schools in the holistic development of SWD had this group of respondents calling out for more government assistance, acknowledgement, and funding to meeting the complex needs of these children.

The survey participants who considered that mainstreaming would not work for their child had several reasons for making the claim. These encompassed but were not limited to: anxiety in undergoing the transition, lack of addressing the specific needs of the child in a mainstream setting, and that the theoretical rationale underpinning mainstreaming lacked practicality and evidence that mainstream inclusion works for all.

5. Some survey respondents were of the perspective that, in spite of special schools being the best fit for their child or children, there is a need for continuing improvement. The proposed suggestions are not representative of the whole survey population but tended to be setting specific, and the response of single families or parents. However, they are listed to honour the expressed views of respondents.

A small number of parents across a variety of settings requested an increase in personalised learning for their child (B18, B22, B 49). Different parents suggested that

a variety of opportunities to meeting the specific learning needs of the student were required. Some examples included *(i) to grant greater access to Auslan (B278) or (ii) to provide more technological resources (B24).* Many parents celebrated the small group approach to teaching and hope that this could be sustained through the *employment of more teachers (B28) teacher aides (B37) and therapists (B39). Send in more reinforcements – Invest in our children today (B46)* advocated one parent.

One parent desired greater behavioural support for their child including one request for specifically *taking into account the child's complex emotional needs and fostering confidence in their abilities (B45).* Another parent asked for a continuing focus on life skill strategies based on the child's disability (B71), and in a further example, providing *more therapy as appropriate including the involvement of allied health professionals (B98).* Communication between therapists and parents was also deemed to enhance the learning outcomes for the children (B133).

A section of the respondents also recommended the *provision of and access to more advanced technologies such as the eye-gaze program (B95), sensory room, and sensory equipment (B78).* One parent requested funding to enhance the built environment for example, introducing *opportunities to engage in better sporting activities and better trade services (B264).* There were minimal requests for greater community access (B262) to the schools as a means to assisting students towards better independent learning (B260) and development opportunities.

In the perspective of some of the respondents, there was support for the partial immersion of particular students into the mainstream school; nevertheless, a small group of parents across settings, requested a *better coordinated support structure in place for seamless transition and adjustment, if partial immersion was to occur (B15, B243).*

It is not only more personalised learning that the respondents perceive can be more accommodating in terms of the respective needs of SWD. Some respondents asked for more intensive one-on-one help for each student (B167, B180). Parents listed a variety of possible solutions including smaller class sizes (B28), and more time granted to itinerant teachers to work with the student (B40, B120). They also identified a greater investment of special school staff in focused literacy and numeracy programs for all children especially those with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and learning difficulties (B186). Some survey respondents also highlighted the need for updating parents by providing more details about the school day via applications like 'Seesaw Class App' and the 'Communication Book'. This, according to them, can be instrumental to monitoring the development of their child's progress and experiences on a daily basis (B190, B255).

A minimal number of respondents stated that having programs and measures in place that enhance opportunities for employment after school would be worthwhile for these cohorts of students. *Please provide more post-school options that cater for different disabilities (B80).* Such programs, according to the respondents, would contribute to equipping the students with real-world living skills to become workforce ready (B80) as

compared to focusing only on the academic performance of the individual and school. As one parent requested: *Provide more options for him to engage in skills of daily living rather than being tied to a curriculum that is meaningless to him (B72).*

6. Proponents of this perspective captured the respondents' emphatic views that special schools need more funding and resources including knowledgeable and trained support staff like teacher aides, and assistants as well as better physical amenities. Parents based this call on a belief that *more trained staff can cater for the diverse learning needs of SWD (B26)*. Parents argue that *if there are more teachers available and those teachers have access to appropriate resources(B18)*, then *more personalised programs (B22)* and *one to one training with children (B23)* would be ensured. Individual teaching initiatives such as these invite the staff to get to know students better and support student learning (B27). It was expressed by one parent that it will also assist the students to process their learning more successfully through individual tuition (B28). More funding would also facilitate the provision of more equipment to meet individual needs (B33). As one parent suggests:

> *I think the physical needs of my child could be increased with more help from the school in regard to use of equipment e.g., standing frames, gait trainer etc…catering more effectively for students with physical disabilities (B211).*

The provision of adequate support equipment for students will ensure their continuing individual development (B194).

It was thought that appropriate funding, can also be channelled towards effective staff and ongoing teacher professional learning (B198) as a means of support for staff. Parents noted the need for more therapists to be available in class time (B222) and called for an increase of support personnel to assist teachers with individual learning (B230).

Question 17

A seventh and major overarching perspective emerged in response to the participants proposing 'other' views in relation to their experience or concerns to do with their child being enrolled at a special school setting. This perspective is outlined below:

7. The overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed concern that mainstream settings are questionable in comparison to what special schools have to offer in terms of care, support, and understanding of the different types of disabilities they deal with. The following sentiment reflects the feelings of many parents who responded to the survey.

> *My child would not be able to attend a mainstream school. She has multiple disabilities, is nonverbal and vision impaired. The special school she attends is the most appropriate school to meet her needs in a small group. (C22)*

Another parent reflects on their experience of removing their child from a mainstream school, (C24) placing him in a special school setting where he has flourished. *I can't*

praise the school enough for this opportunity for my son. In a like situation another parent noted, *we tried integration in grade 5/6 in a supported environment (but) it wasn't as successful as the special school environment (C37).*

Various reasons were cited by the respondents to support their claim and were not limited to knowledgeable and trained staff or the suitability of the specifically designed physical environment as noted in the earlier sections of this report. The responses from across the survey population challenging the suitability of mainstream settings for their child included the following:

(i) expertise required in dealing with different types of disabilities at special schools is essential and not always present in mainstream settings. As one parent reports: *Placing my son into a mainstream setting would never be able to meet his needs. He needs true peers. He needs specialist teachers. He greatly benefits from his specifically designed school environment, from classroom to playground and even the school entry, Inclusion is the opportunity for everyone to have their needs met properly and our special school does that (C38).*

(ii) the lack of appropriate and adequate infrastructure support to deal with various disability types in mainstream institutions places students at risk.
Parent C65 recounts her experience on the placement of her daughter in a mainstream setting.

She states:
My daughter came from a mainstream where she struggled immensely. The class sizes were larger but also, they lacked the specific care and support that she needed in order to be successful in her learning. Fortunately, she was able to secure a place at a special school where her learning has progressed in leaps and bounds! Something that I am certain would not have been achievable in a mainstream setting.

Parent C55 illustrates how the infrastructure within a special school setting offers more appropriate support to SWD. They report:

Our family is new to the School and in this time we, have formed a wonderful relationship with our School. We have noticed that the teaching within the classroom structure is really engaging. Having a Support Teacher in the classroom is definitely needed as there are many differing disabilities within the classroom that require special attention. I see our School as a very experienced, adaptable, and caring people. This I believe is due to the leadership in our school. I believe our School goes above and beyond their roles as teachers. We feel more than happy with our School.

It became evident across the data that the experience of a number of parents who have experienced both mainstream education and special school settings that *mainstream has much to learn from ... disability education (C16). Mainstream is not an option unless*

you want to bring mainstream to specialist schools (C21). Parent C 16 concludes that *one size will never fits all, and if we can make education more flexible and responsive across all levels of educational ability then we will have fewer children who disengage with school, and a workforce who value a flexible workplace.*

It was deemed by a number of parents that special schools are an essential part of the educational landscape in Australia and that *nothing can be gained by limiting options (C28)* for SWD. They argue that the special school environment is very positive for SWD students who are well supported and in the main, students have a very successful experience (C29) both socially and academically according to their needs. Parent 33 supports this sentiment in declaring that not all kids with special needs will thrive in mainstream. *It can be too overwhelming and there's nowhere near enough support to help them (C33).*

(iii) the lack of acceptance, empathy, and bullying that is often unavoidable in mainstream settings also positions SWD at risk;
Based on previous experiences, a number of parents reported negatively, regarding the placement of their child in a mainstream setting. While these experiences are not generalizable across contexts and families, the comments are certainly insightful for all.

We had a terrible experience in a mainstream school special needs class – they were beyond awful - his special school setting was a revelation (C73)

In contrast C127 reports:
my son attends a state school for children with special needs only. This is and always will be the ideal school for him. ...he is protected from the bullying and nasty children that go to the mainstream school and the staff here have provided the best care, support and assistance with his learning (C127).

Parent C9 reports
our daughter has physical and intellectual disabilities and would not survive mainstream school as she is different from other ordinary children and would be shunned.

(v) the apprehension (by the respondents) that their child will not be able to adjust, function, and thrive in any other educational setting but a special school environment.
Parent C12 states:
Education is not about inclusion but it's about the best fit for the child. Special schools for students who need them are a great education option. If parents want to place their children in mainstream schools they have an option (but)...they may not be increasing inclusivity, they are reducing learning opportunities (C12).

This sentiment captures the many diverse views of participating parents regarding the policy recommending the inclusion of SWD into mainstream settings. There is no consensus but across the data there is a great deal of apprehension that SWD will not thrive in mainstream settings for a variety of reasons that are outlined above.

From a more positive perspective Parent C13 places special schools in a *completely different league.* She recounts that, as a parent of two children with severe disabilities, the support she receives from the teachers of her children in special schools is a matter of family survival. She claims, *our friends with disabled kids in support units and mainstream do not do a fraction of what my kids do and learn. (C13).*

In view of these reasons, some of the respondents assertively put forward their perspective that while inclusion is visionary as a concept, the reality has it far from what it is purported to be in theory.

> *The notion that all children should be shoe-horned into a mainstream setting (even with support) is dangerous and wrong. "Advocates" who aggressively push for this are being short sighted and overly idealistic. Special schools have an extremely important role to play in educating many children. Forcing these children into a mainstream setting in the name of "inclusion" may create the illusion of success and a feel-good feeling for inclusion advocates but does so (in my opinion) at the expense of educational outcomes for the children and an increased feeling of isolation for parents. Whilst I understand the rationale and it may well be the best solution for some (mild or purely physical disabilities) for more profound disabilities it's not the solution. On top of this mainstream teachers' knowledge of how to effectively teach even mild learning difficulties such as dyslexia is woeful so the notion that they can add value teaching children with very complex needs is ludicrous. (C49)*

One parent who had experience in a mainstream setting referred to the model as broken, confirming his worst fears. *My child was constantly viewed through the lenses of what she can't do verses the special school view of what she can do (C34).* The parent elaborated on what an impact this can have on learning for their child; an impact that they reported can only be understood through experience. The person concluded: *No matter how flowery the inclusion policy is – there is a massive disconnect between policy and what actually happens with special needs kids in mainstream schools (C34).*

One respondent (C164) shared a powerful narrative of their son being excluded from mainstream settings. It was the parent's perspective that only a special school offered the student an admission to education that ensured the fulfillment of his learning and developmental needs.

Based on the survey data it is clear that:
- parents are highly satisfied with the type and frequency of educational support provided by the special schools across Australia (91%)
- parents have expressed a high degree of acknowledgement that staff understand and recognise strengths and needs of their child (84%);
- from a curriculum perspective, parents are satisfied that ongoing accommodations and/modifications facilitate positive learning and development for their child (87%);
- this satisfaction is very much based on the utilisation of and access to technology

and other programs and services in place for students in special school settings (84%).

Together with this expression of high confidence in the staff and programs offered in special schools, parents have also expressed an extensive data base of qualitative perspective that endorse the statistical finding.
In summary these include the following perspectives:

1. My special school supports my child in developing life skills.
2. My special school provides a safe and nurturing learning environment for my child.
3. There is effective communication between my school and my family.
4. Special schools, are already doing a good job in terms of the support and care towards learning and the holistic development of my child.
5. Special schools are deemed as being the best fit for my child, however, there is also a need for continuing improvement.
6. School funding needs to be sustained or increased for a variety of reasons to sustain the quality of education for my child.
7. There is a disconnect between theory and practice when SWD are integrated into mainstream schools.

Discussion

These data capture information from families on those curricular and other school practices that add value to the learning experiences of SWD as well as identify issues and concerns that a minority of parents have expressed. The data analysis demonstrates that 91% of the respondents express a high degree satisfaction with the type of educational support that their children receive in the special school setting. Only 5% of the respondents express some concerns and the reasons varied across contexts. There is no one reason underpinning the minor dissatisfaction. A majority of respondents (73%) indicated that they are also satisfied with the frequency of educational support for their children. The qualitative data has conveyed many reasons for the degree of satisfaction including the expertise of teachers and staff employed in special school settings. Further, parents recognise the professional capacities of teachers and specialist staff to identify the needs and requirements of their children necessary to enhance their development from unique perspectives. The majority of parents also value the place of safety and risk averse practices that characterise the culture of the special schools, generating feelings of confidence that their child is growing and developing according to their capacities and within a community that invites them to flourish with their peers.

Of the participating parents, 84% record their satisfaction with the balancing of the curriculum between academic and life or social skills development. While some parents felt that greater emphasis could be placed on preparing the students for post school opportunities there was a strong sense of satisfaction from 87% of parents with the

accommodations or modification in learning and development that were designed by special school staff for their children.

It can be concluded that the majority of the 390 parents who successfully completed the survey have expressed their confidence in the expertise of staff and leaders of the special school in which their child is enrolled. The qualitative comments analysed above can substantiate the finding. The voices of parents expressed through the survey must be acknowledged and the fine work that specialist teachers working with SWD are achieving, academically, socially and emotionally must be publicly acclaimed.

While there have been suggestions for improvement in terms of curriculum, resourcing and communication the great majority of parents report that the schools fulfilled their needs and expectations and, at the same time, provide a safe, secure, and caring learning environment that caters to the need of students in an evidence-based manner, with the staff cognisant of and open to the individual learning challenges and implications. An overwhelming majority of the respondents reported that the respective special schools at which their children are enrolled, are doing an excellent job in terms of support and care towards the learning and the holistic development of the child. This support was based on consistent findings across contexts that, in special school settings, staff are knowledgeable, trained, and skilled in meeting the education and development needs of children as compared to mainstream counterparts, who according to the

respondents, lacked the repertoire to understand the complex needs and valuing of the SWD.

It cannot be denied, based on this evidence that most parents are extremely satisfied with the education provided to their child in special school settings across Australia. The presentation of this sentiment and the findings of this research are timely in a country where the parents of students with disabilities have been continuously silenced through a lack of consultation. The evidence provided here claims a new space for parents of SWD and the communities of special schools in Australia. This new space very much challenges the positioning of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and reflects strong parental desire to maintain special schools for their children in order to facilitate the child's right to a fair and equitable education.

The great majority of parents in the current study expressed their confidence in special schools in terms of catering to the holistic development of their children as compared to a mainstream setting. According to this group of survey respondents, while inclusion is visionary as a concept, the reality has it far from what it is purported to be for this cohort of students. Parents of SWD fear that their children might not receive needed services in a mainstream classroom setting and that their children might not be necessarily safe outside of the inclusive settings of their special school.

The overwhelming majority of the cohort of 390 participants expressed satisfaction with the experience of special education for their child. This presents a strong message for the broader community particularly to those who argue for a move away from special

schools in favour of the integration/inclusion of SWD into mainstream classrooms. Despite a vast literature advocating for the inclusion of SWD in mainstream schools, the perspectives reported in the current study argue overwhelmingly that teachers and professional staff in special schools have the expertise, the attitudes and dispositions, the capabilities, and the compassion to best meet the needs of SWD when compared to their non-disabled peers.

Recommendations

Based on the perspectives of parents, it is recommended that:

1. The voices of parents documented in this report and their advocacy for special school education that is aligned to the unique needs of their child is widely disseminated across the Australian community

2. Provision of special school education be sustained in order to ensure quality education for all children, inclusive of students with disabilities, in keeping with the UN Rights of the Child in providing every child with the best life that they can achieve (Article 3) through making the rights available to all children (Article 4) and to " respect the rights and responsibilities of families to guide their children…" (Article 5).

3. Governments maintain and extend the funding of the quality educational and developmental programs offered to SWD by special schools in Australia.

4. Schools continue to strengthen their communication with parents and guardians to arrive at and continuously review their child's progress from academic, life and social skills perspectives.

5. Communications with parents take into consideration the diverse backgrounds of families in entering and sustaining the relationship with staff, particularly regarding the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of parents.

6. Planning of learning opportunities is inclusive of discussions with parent regarding expectations to meet daily living skills, job and community skills, self-determination skills, and social and communication skills as well as curriculum expectations including the development of academic literacy and numeracy skills.

7. Staff keep parents informed of the technology and programs adopted by the staff to achieve their child's goals and outcomes.

8. Systems and sectors reassure parents that special schools will continue to be allocated the appropriate resources to adequately staff and support students.

9. Pre-service teacher preparation providers consider making special education subjects compulsory within initial teacher preparation programs.

10. Sufficient funding for professional development is in place for in-service teachers and the support staff within special schools if inclusive education is to be achieved for all. ''

Conclusion

This contemporary research adds to the new narrative developing for parents of SWD and the communities of special schools in Australia. It demonstrates how Australian Special Schools have responded to the themes in the international Literature Review and are ensuring parents and caregivers are collaborators and equal partners in educational decision making. The partnership that has been expressed by the majority of these respondents is one of empowerment and not passive recipients in their children's educational journey.

It has also highlights there is still work to be done in the sector in areas such as transition planning and the need to continue to grow school and community partnerships. Parent perceptions of funding will be an area that maybe of interests to policy-makers and politicians moving forward. The overarching tone of respondents has been one of mutual respect and trust with schools and a feeling of satisfaction with the education of their children.

As stated at the outset of this study – this is the first in a series to ensure that the muted voices of parents who choose to send their children to special schools in Australia are heard, respected and valued.

References

Adams, D., Harris, A., & Jones, M. S. (2016). Teacher-parent collaboration for an inclusive classroom: Success for every child. Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences, 4(3), 58-72.

Ainscow, M., & Sandill, A. (2010). Developing inclusive education systems: The role of organisational cultures and leadership. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14(4), 401-416. doi: 10.1080/13603110802504903

Aspland T., Datta, P., & Talukdar, J (2012). Curriculum policies for students with special needs in Australia. International Journal of Special Education, 27(3), 36-44.

Australian Governments Education Council. (2019). Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration: December 2019. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from https://www.dese.gov.au/uncategorised/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2019). A brief guide to the Disability Discrimination Act. Retrieved March 4, 2021, from https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/brief-guide-disability-discrimination-act

Avrimidis, E., Bayliss, P., & Burdon, R. (2000). A survey into mainstream teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the ordinary school in one local education authority. Educational Psychology, 20(2), 191-212. doi: 10.1080/713663717

Bacon, J. K. & Causton-Theoharis, J. (2013). 'It should be teamwork': a critical investigation ofschool practices and parent advocacy in special education. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 17(7), 682-699. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2012.708060

Bartak, L., & Fry, J. (2004). Are students with special needs in mainstream classes adequately supported? Perceptions from teachers in Victoria. Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, 9(1), 16-21. doi: 10.1080/19404150409546750

Basham,J. D., Hall, T. E., Carter Jr., R. A., & Stahl, W. M. (2016). An operationalized understanding of personalized learning. Journal of Special Education Technology, 31(3), 126-136. doi: 10.1177/0162643416660835

Basham, J. D., Stahl, S., Ortiz, K., Rice, M.F., & Smith, S. (2015). Equity matters: Digital & online learning for students with disabilities. Lawrence, KS: Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities. Retrieved March 4, 2021, from http://www.centerononlinelearning.res.ku.edu/equity-matters-digital-and-online-learning-for-students-with-disabilities/

Broomhead, K. (2013). Blame, guilt and the need for 'labels'; insights from parents of children with special educational needs and educational practitioners. British Journal of Special Education, 40(1), 1-21. doi: 10.1111/1467-8578.12012

Buchanan, R., Nese, R. N. T., & Clark, M. (2016). Stakeholders' voices: Defining needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders transitioning between school settings. Behavioural Disorders, 41(3), 135-147. doi: 10.17988/BD-15-73.1

Burke, M. M., & Hodapp, R. M. (2016). The nature, correlates, and conditions of parental advocacy in special education. Exceptionality, 24(3), 137-150. doi:10.1080/09362835.2015.1064412

Burke, M. M., Meadan-Kaplansky, H., Patton, K. A., Pearson, J. N., Cummings, K. P., & Lee, C. (2018). Advocacy for children with social-communication needs: Perspectives from parents and school professionals. The Journal of Special Education, 51(4), 191-200.
doi: 10.1177/0022466917716898

Bussing, R., Gary, F. A., Leon, C. E., Garvan, C. W. & Reid, R. 92002). General classroom teachers' information and perceptions of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Behavioral Disorders, 27(4), 327-339. doi: 10.1177/019874290202700402

Carlisle, E., Stanley, L., & Kemple, K. M. (2005). Opening doors: Understanding school and family influences on family involvement. Early Childhood Education Journal, 33(3), 155-162. doi: 10.1007/s10643-005-0043-1

Carly, L. B., Carter, E. W., & McMillan, E. D. (2016). The voices of parents: Post–high school expectations, priorities, and concerns for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Journal of Special Education, 50(3), 164-177. doi: 10.1177/0022466916641381

Carrington, S. (1999). Inclusion needs a different school culture. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 3(3), 257-268. doi: 10.1080/136031199285039

Cavendish, W., & Connor, D. J. (2018). Introduction to special series: Parent voice in educationaldecision making for students with learning disabilities. Learning Disability Quarterly, 41(1), 4-6. doi: 10.1177/0731948717692308

Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). School and families: Creating essential connections for learning. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Chu, S-Y. (2014). Perspectives of teachers and parents of Chinese American students with disabilities about their home–school communication. Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 58(4), 237-248. doi: 10.1080/1045988X.2013.809685

Cole, C. M., Waldron, N., & Majd, M. (2004). Academic progress of students across inclusive and traditional settings. Mental Retardation, 42(2), 136-144. doi: 10.1352/0047-6765(2004)42<136:APOSAI>2.0.CO;2

Collier, M., Keefe, E. B., & Hirrel, L. A. (2015). Preparing special education teachers to collaborate with families. School Community Journal, 25(1), 117-135.

Conroy, P. W. (2012). Collaborating with cultural and linguistically diverse families of students in rural schools who receive special education services. Rural Special Education Quarterly, 31(3), 20-24. doi: 10.1177/875687051203100304

Cosier, M., Causton-Theoharis, J., & Theoharis, G. (2013). Does access matter? Time in general education and achievement for students with disabilities. Remedial and Special Education, 34(6), 323-332. doi: 10.1177/0741932513485448

Daniel, L. G., & King, D. A. (1997). Impact of inclusion education on academic achievement, student behavior and self-esteem, and parental attitudes. The Journal of Educational Research, 91(2), 67-80. doi: 10.1080/00220679709597524

Davis, P., Florian, L., Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Farrell, P., Hick, P., ... Rouse, M. (2004). Teaching strategies and approaches for pupils with special educational needs: A scoping study (Research Report RR516, Department for Education and Skills). Retrieved August 23, 2020, from https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6059/1/RR516.pdf

de Bruin, K. (2019). The impact of inclusive education reforms on students with disability: an international comparison. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23(7-8), 811-826. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2019.1623327

deFur, S. (2012). Parents as collaborators: Building partnerships with school- and community-based providers. Teaching Exceptional Children, 44(3), 58-67. doi; 10.1177/004005991204400307 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020). The Disability Standards for Education 2005. Retrieved March 4, 2021, from https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005

Duquia, R. P., Bastos, J. L., Bonamigo, R. R., González-Chica, D. A., & Martínez-Mesa, J. (2014). Presenting data in tables and charts. Anais Brasileiros de Dermatologia 89(2), 280-285. doi: 10.1590/abd1806-4841.20143388

Emde, M. (2014). Open-ended questions in Web surveys. Using visual and adaptive questionnaire design to improve narrative responses. Dissertation. Technische Universität

Darmstadt, Deutschland. Fine, M. J. & Gardner, A. (1994). Collaborative consultation with families of children with special needs: Why bother? Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 5(4), 283-308. doi: 10.1207/s1532768xjepc0504_1

Fisher, D., Sax, C., Rodifer, K., & Pumpian, I. (1999). Teachers' perspectives of curriculum and climate changes. Journal for a Just and Caring Education, 5(3), 256-268.

Florian, L. (2019). On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23(7-8), 691-704. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2019.1622801

Fogle, K. C., Hoppey, D., & Allsopp, D. H. (2020). The fight within: Parent- educators advocating for their children with autism inside their own school districts. Teacher Education and Special Education, 43(2), 162-177. doi: 10.1177/0888406419861964

Forlin, C. (1997). Teachers' perceptions of the stress associated with inclusive education and theirmethods of coping. Paper presented at the National Conference of the Australian Association of Special Education, 21st Brisbane, Australia, 25-28 September. Retrieved August 23, 2020, from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED425582.pdf

Gould, A., & Vaughn, S. (2000). Planning for the inclusive classroom: Meeting the needs of diverseclassrooms. Catholic Education, 3(3), 363-374. doi: 10.15365/joce.0303102013

Gross, C. M. (2011). Parenting a child with learning disabilities: A viewpoint for teachers from a teacher and parent. Issues in Teacher Education, 20(1), 85-93

Haby, M. M., Chapman, E., Clark, R., Barreto, J., Reveiz, & Lavis, J. N. (2016). What are the best methodologies for rapid reviews of the research evidence for evidence-informed decision making in health policy and practice: A rapid review. Health Research Policy and Systems, 14(Article 83), 1-12. doi: 10.1186/s12961-016-0155-7

Hamel, C., Michaud, A., Thuku, M., Skidmore, B., Stevens, A., … Garritty, C. (2020). Defining rapid reviews: a systematic scoping review and thematic analysis of definitions and defining characteristics of rapid reviews. Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, 129, 74-85.
doi: 10.1016/j.jclinepi.2020.09.041

Hanline, M. F., & Halvorsen, A. (1989). Parent perceptions of the integration transition process: Overcoming artificial barriers. Exceptional Children, 55(6), 487-492. doi; 10.1177/001440298905500601

Hayes, A. M., & Bulat, J. (2017). Disabilities inclusive education systems and policies guide for low- and middle-income countries. RTI Press Publication No. XX-0043-1707. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI Press. Retrieved August 28, 2020, from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK554622/

Hehir, T., Grindal, T., Freeman, B., Lamoreau, R., Borquaye, Y., & Burke, S. (2016). A summary of the evidence on inclusive education. Pinheros, São Paulo: Instituto Alana. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from https://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf

Hendersen, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on students' achievement. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Laboratory.

Hsiao, Y-J., Higgins, K., & Diamond, L. (2018). Parent empowerment: Respecting their voices. Teaching Exceptional Children, 51(1), 43-53. doi: 10.1177/0040059918790240

Jahnukainen, M., & Korhonen, A. (2003). Integration of students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities into the comprehensive school system: Teachers' perceptions of the education reform in Finland. International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 50(2), 169-180. doi: 10.1080/1034912032000089666

Lo, L., & Bui, O. (2020). Transition planning: Voices of Chinese and Vietnamese parents of youth withautism and intellectual disabilities. Career Development and Transition for Exceptional individuals, 43(2), 89-100. doi: 10.1177/2165143419899938

MacLeod, K., Causton, J. N., Radel, M., & Radel, P. (2017). Rethinking the Individualized Education Plan process: voices from the other side of the table. Disability & Society, 32(3), 381-400. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2017.1294048

Mann, G. R. (2016). An exploration of parental decisions to transfer children from regular to special schools. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Brisbane, Australia: University of Queensland.

Messiou, K. (2017). Research in the field of inclusive education: time for a rethink? international Journal of Inclusive Education, 21(2), 146-159. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2016.1223184

Mueller, T. G., & Buckley, P. C. (2014). Fathers' experiences with the special education system: the overlooked voice. Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 39(2), 119-135. doi: 0.1177/1540796914544548

Narr, R. F., & Kemmery, M. (2015). The nature of parent support provided by parent mentors for families with deaf/hard-of-hearing children: Voices from the start. Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 20(1), 67-74. doi: 10.1093/deafed/enu029

Nespor, J., & Hicks, D. (2010). Wizards and witches: parent advocates and contention in special education in the USA. Journal of Education Policy, 25(3), 309-334. doi: 10.1080/02680931003671954

Northeastern Catholic District School Board (n.d.). Special Education Parent Satisfaction Survey. Retrieved July 11, 2019, from https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CGSVPS3

NSW Ombudsman (2011). Consultation with families of children with disabilities on access to services and support: Final report. Retrieved May 23, 2019, from
https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/news-and-publications/publications/reports/community-and-disability-services/previous-community-and-disability-services-reports/consultations-with-families-of-children-with-disabilities-on-access-to-services-and-support

Obiakor, F. E., Harris, M., Mutua, K., Rotatori, A., & Algozzine, B. (2012). Making Inclusion Work inGeneral Education Classrooms. Education and Treatment of Children, 35(3), 477-490. doi: 10.1353/etc.2012.0020

Parsons, S., & Lewis, A. (2010). The home education of children with special needs or disabilities in the UK: views of parents from an online survey. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14(1), 67-86. doi: 10.1080/13603110802504135

Poed, S., Cologon, K., & Jackson, R. (2020). Gatekeeping and restrictive practices with students with

disability: results of a national survey. International Journal of Inclusive Education, Online First. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2020.1726512

Robinson, M. A. (2018). Using multi-item psychometric scales for research and practice in human resource management. Human Resource Management, 57, 739-750. doi: 10.1002/hrm.21852

Royal Commission. (2020a). About the Royal Commission. Retrieved March 4, 2021, from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/about-royal-commission

Royal Commission. (2020b). Document library. Retrieved March 4, 2021, from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/document-library
Royal Commission. (2020c). Public hearing 7: Barriers to accessing a safe, quality and inclusive school education and life course impacts. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/rounds/public-hearing-7-barriers-accessing-safe-quality-and-inclusive-school-education-and-life-course-impacts

Royal Commission. (2020d). Disability Royal Commission releases third progress report. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/news-and-media/media-releases/disability-royal-commission-releases-third-progress-report

Royal Commission. (2020e). Royal Commission releases Second Progress Report. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/news-and-media/media-releases/royal-commission-releases-second-progress-report-11-august-2020

Royal Commission. (2020f). Chair Closing Address - Public hearing 7, Brisbane. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/chair-closing-address-public-hearing-7-brisbane

Sandelowski, M. (1994). Focus on qualitative methods: The use of quotes in qualitative research. Research in Nursing & Health, 17(6), 479-482. doi: 10.1002/nur.4770170611

Sedibe, M., & Fourie, J. (2018). Exploring opportunities and challenges in parent–school partnershipsin special needs schools in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. Interchange, 49(3), 433-444. doi: 10.1007/s10780-018-9334-5

Slevitch, L. (2011). Qualitative and quantitative methodologies compared: Ontological and epistemological perspectives. Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism, 12(1), 73-81. doi: 10.1080/1528008X.2011.541810

Starr, E. M., & Foy, J. B. (2012). In parents' voices: The education of children with AutismSpectrum Disorders. Remedial and Special Education, 33(4), 2017-216. doi: 10.1177/0741932510383161

Strauss, A. L., & Glaser, B. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. New Brunswick, U.S.A.: Aldine Transaction.

Stoner, J. B., Bock, S. J., Thompson, J. R., Angell, M. E., Heyl, B. S., & Crowley, E. P. (2005). Welcome to our world: Parent perceptions of interactions between parents ofcyoung children with ASD and education professionals. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 20(1), 39-51. doi: 10.1177/10883576050200010401

The National Health & Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Universities Australia. (2018). National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018

Trainor, A. A. (2010a). Educators' expectations of parent participation: The role of cultural and social capital. Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 12(2), 33-50. doi; 10.5555/muvo.12.2.01x3497585xtw067
Trainor, A. A. (2010b). Reexamining the promise of parent participation in special education: An analysis of cultural and social capital. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 41(3), 245-263. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1492.2010.01086.x.

Trainor, A. A. (2010b). Diverse approaches to parent advocacy during special education home–school interactions. Remedial and Special Education, 31(1), 34-47. doi: 10.1177/0741932508324401

United Nations. (2006). 15. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Treaty Series, vol. 2515, p. 3). Retrieved March 4, 2021, from https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-15&chapter=4

United Nations. (2020). Article 24 – Education. Retrieved March 4, 2021, from https://www.un.org/development/

desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-24-education.html

Vogt, W. P., Gardner, D. C., & Haeffele, L. M. (2012). When to use what research design. New York: The Guilford Press.

Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Levine, P., & Garza, N. (2006). An overview of findings from wave 2 of the national longitudinal transition study-2 (NLTS2). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved August 28, 2020, from https://ies.ed.gov/ncser/pdf/20063004.pdf

Westwood, P., & Graham, L. (2003). Inclusion of students with special needs: Benefits and obstaclesperceived by teachers in New South Wales and South Australia. Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, 8(1), 3-15. doiI: 10.1080/19404150309546718

Williams-Diehm, K. L., Brandes, J. A., Chesnut, P. K., & Haring, K. A. (2014). Student and parent IEP collaboration: A comparison across school settings. Rural Special Education Quarterly, 33(1), 3-11. doi: 10.1177/875687051403300102

Williams, E. (2012). Encouraging discussion between teacher candidates and families with exceptional children. Education, 133(2), 239-247.

Wolfe, K., & Duran, L. K. (2013). Culturally and linguistically diverse parents' perceptions of the IEP Process: A review of current research. Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 13(2), 4-18. doi; 10.5555/muvo.13.2.y452140732mlg231

Zagona, A. L., Miller, A. L., Kurth, J. A., & Love, H. R. (2019). Parent perspectives on special education services: How do schools implement team decisions? School Community Journal, 29(2), 105-128.

Zeitlin, V. M., & Curcic, S. (2014). Parental voices on Individualized Education Programs: 'Oh, IEP meeting tomorrow? Rum tonight!'. Disability & Society, 29(3), 373-387.
doi: 10.1080/09687599.2013.776493

Appendix 1
'Research Instrument' (Online Survey)

Parent Satisfaction in Specialist Schools in Australia (adapted from Northeastern Catholic District School Board available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CGSVPS3)

We value your feedback. Please take a few moments to answer the questions below regarding your family's experience with Special Education services in your child's school.

1. What Year Level is your child currently in?
Kindergarten
Year 1
Year 2
Year 3
Year 4
Year 5
Year 6
Year 7
Year 8
Year 9
Year 10
Year 11
Year 12

2. In which State/Territory in Australia does your child attend school

3. In which sector is your child's school located in?
Government
Independent
Catholic

4. What is your child's primary disability?
Blindness/Low Vision
Deaf/Hard of Hearing
Physical Disability
Intellectual Disability
Autism Spectrum Disorder
Speech and Language Disability
Psychiatric Disorder
Any other disability, please specify

5. Identify the level of support that your child receives within the school. Please check all that apply.
Support from a School Learning and Support Officer or Teacher Aide/Teaching Assistant in the classroom
Support from an Itinerant Support Teacher in the classroom
Support from a Speech, Occupational Therapist and/or Physiotherapist
Personalised Interventions designed for your child
Other (please specify)

Unsure

6. How satisfied are you with the type of educational support that your child receives at the school?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied

7. How satisfied are you with the frequency of support that your child receives to support his/her needs?
We are pleased with the services provided
We wish there was more support from a School Learning and Support Officer or Teacher Aide/Teaching Assistant in the classroom
We wish there was more support from an itinerant support teacher
We wish there were some personalised interventions designed for my child's needs
Other (please specify)

8. How satisfied are you with the school's overall understanding of your child's strengths and needs?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied

9. How satisfied are you with the accommodations or the modifications to the curriculum that has been developed through the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for your child and in collaboration with you?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
It is difficult for me to understand my child's IEP

10. How satisfied are you with the opportunity to provide information to the school about your child's strengths and needs?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
I don't recall being asked to provide information

11. How satisfied are you with the school's efforts to develop self-advocacy skills, for example, where he/she is able to tell others what they need to do to help him/her be successful at school?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
My child struggles to explain to others what he/she needs to be successful at school

12. How satisfied are you with the amount of information that you receive about your child's progress towards meeting the goals in his/her

Individual Education Plan (IEP)?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
I would like more regular contact with the school about my child's progress

13. How satisfied are you with your child's access to technology at school (Computer/ Chromebook, iPad, Google Read and Write)?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
Unsure of what technology my child has access to at school

14. How satisfied are you with the programs and services that your child has access at school?
Extremely satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Slightly dissatisfied
Extremely dissatisfied
Unsure of what services my child may have access to

15. In your opinion, what is being done well at school to support your child's disability and additional learning and support needs?

16. In your opinion, how can we help your child to be more successful at school?

17. Other comments.

Thank you for your participation

www.asepa.edu.au