2023 Inclusive Education Forum

Hosted by the
Whittlesea Tech School

Summary Report of Research Findings
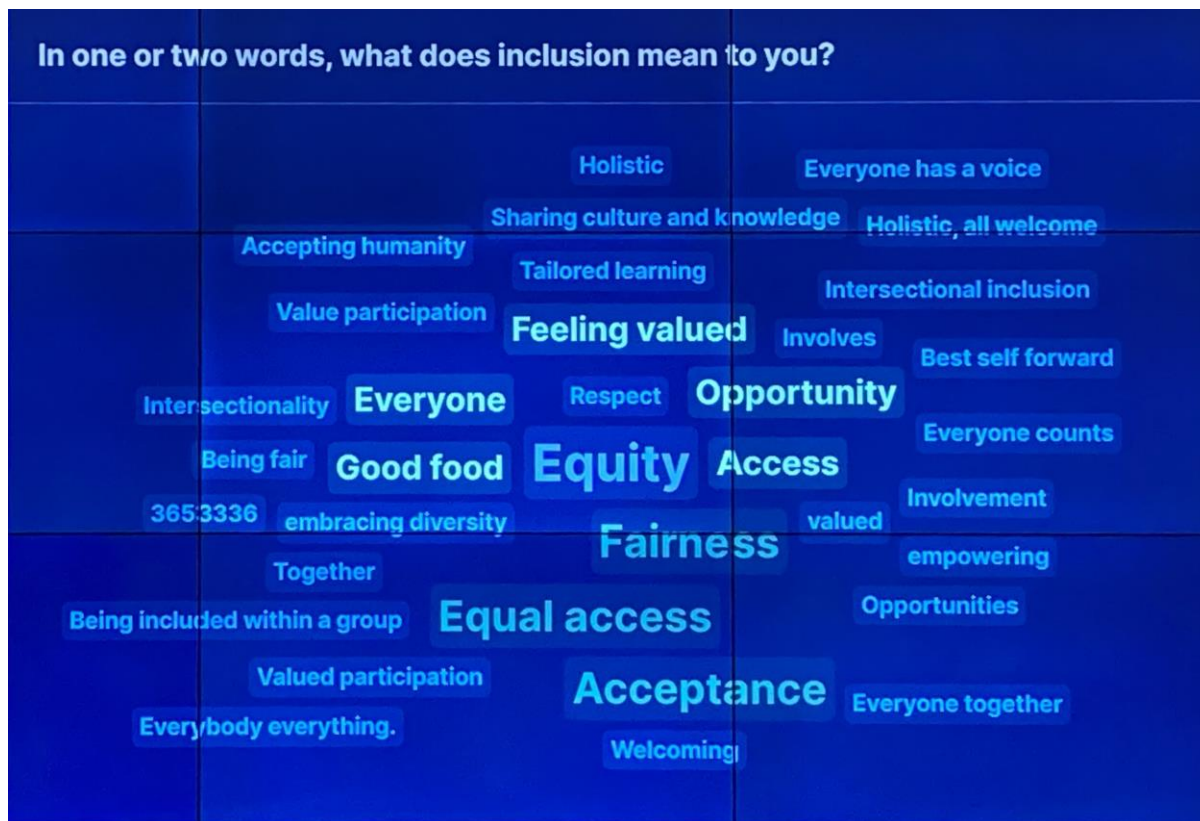
November 2023

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2023 Inclusive Education Forum

Hosted by the Whittlesea Tech School

Word Cloud completed by attendees at the start of the forum event

Introduction

The Inclusive Education Forum was a collaborative event held at the Whittlesea Tech School on the 23rd of November 2023. In addition to networking opportunities the event included:

- Inclusive Education Forum introduction: Sandra McKechnie, Director of the Whittlesea Tech School presented research and resources to foster a conversation about different aspects of inclusion
- Panel session: Tom Quick and a panel of secondary school students discussed enablers and constraints of inclusivity in schools with a focus on neurodiversity
- Workshop 1: Three workshop groups examined current practice in schools to promote inclusivity
- Workshop 2: Three workshop groups used LEGO Serious Play to explore what could be done differently in schools to promote inclusivity
- Plenary session: Simon Taylor summarised the forum from the perspective of an educator
- Event conclusion: Kim Stadtmiller, Executive Officer of the Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN) provided a final message towards developing a shared narrative for inclusion of diverse young people in schools

Executive Summary

The Inclusive Education Forum created a structured conversation to better understand constraints and enablers to inclusivity in schools from the perspectives of students and other stakeholders in education. Based on an analysis of all data collected by the Whittlesea Tech School, the forum has provided the following insights:

Constraints and Enablers

Mental health issues, neurodivergence, disability, trauma experiences, parenting issues, friendships and social skills are significant issues affecting student engagement in schools. Three themes have been used to collect data and present findings from the student panel and workshop activities.

Place: According to the secondary school student panel, many neurodivergent students are challenged by the noise and distraction of open-plan learning environments in secondary schools and would value learning in a variety of spaces including smaller, quieter, more personalised classrooms. Further group discussions in workshops reinforced the need for a range of school environments better suited to students with specific learning needs such as autism. Adapting and creating new learning spaces has been hampered by limited funding to schools which has also impacted on the provision of extra-curricular activities within and outside of schools. Facilitating access to education for all young people also includes considering the availability of transport and the location of schools.

People: Teachers play a significant role in supporting neurodivergent students as they understand their students' learning needs and can advocate for changes to school policies. The student panel recommended having greater diversity of teachers including neurodivergent teachers to support building relationships based on an understanding of students' needs. Discussion between stakeholders identified that due to pressures on teachers, there is often not enough time to build meaningful relationships between teachers, students and families through quality communication. Further, there was wondering as to whether schools have capacity to do more to build a culture that values diversity of students, understanding of inclusivity needs, and fostering student voice in decisions related to learning.

Practice: The student panel identified an over-dependence on the use of individual online learning as a teaching practice since COVID-19. While personalised online learning can be suited to students with neurodivergence such as autism, these students also value in-person social interactions and discussions with peers in a physical classroom environment. The student panel also recommended having more open-ended tasks with a clear learning purpose enabling students to meaningfully engage based on personal interests. Tom Quick noted that support requires developing new teaching approaches to meet specific learner needs. Deeper discussion in groups identified a need for schools to rethink learning and teaching practices to become more flexible and agile in adapting to student needs and choices for learning. Establishing policies of inclusivity could be supported through staff training on the specific needs of different students and the unique strengths they bring to a diverse school culture.

Recommended Next Steps

The Inclusive Education Forum provided an important opportunity to engage with key stakeholders including neurodivergent school students. This forms the basis for broader and deeper engagement from stakeholders. Based on the findings from this forum the following next steps are proposed:

- Preparation of an action plan drawing on existing inclusive education best practice, research and future forums. The intended outcomes and strategic goals of the action plan should be

informed by a mix of stakeholders across education, employment, health, community and government sectors

- Future forums and workshops that include teachers, school leaders, students with diverse strengths and needs, families and education policy makers working through specific aspects of inclusive education
- Development of impactful and implementable strategies and policies to reform education practices and learning environments

Complete Findings from the Inclusive Education Forum

Identifying Issues

Sandra McKechnie provided an overview of the role of inclusive education in meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, findings from the Disability Royal Commission and data from the Department of Education on issues affecting student engagement in schools. Data from wellbeing staff in schools from the Whittlesea LGA were presented by Sandra McKechnie in the following graph:
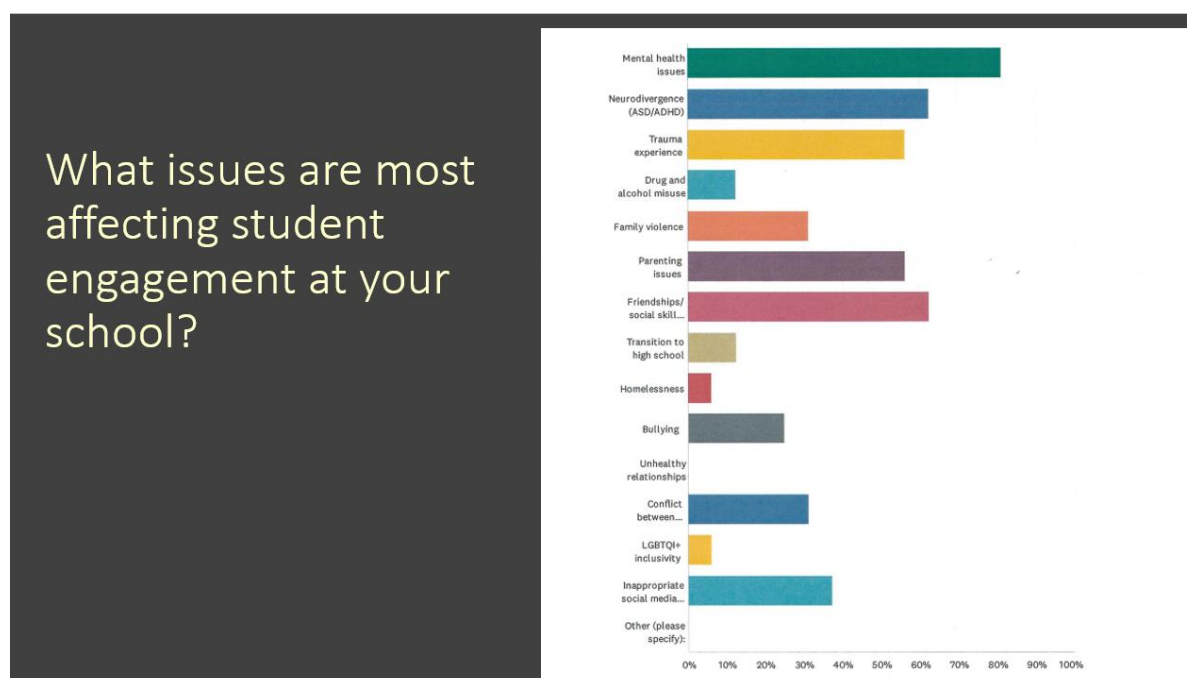
Graph of issues affecting student engagement in schools as reported by school wellbeing staff in Whittlesea LGA

The graph presents a range of issues affecting student engagement with mental health, neurodivergence, trauma experiences, parenting issues and friendships/social skills as issues of significance. Drawing upon a framework of self-actualisation by Dr Scott Barry Kaufman as an elaboration of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Sandra posed the following questions for discussing inclusive education:

- Who's in?
- Who's out?
- How come?
- What are we going to do about this?

Panel Discussions

Tom Quick: Activist for Social Inclusion and Stroke Awareness

Interviewed guest, Tom Quick sharing insights on social inclusion of young stroke survivors

Tom shared his experience of secondary education after recovering from a stroke at 12 years of age and his recent 9000 km trike journey to four points of Australia to raise awareness and funds for stroke victims and to promote social inclusion. More information about Tom's journey can be found at: 4points (the4points.org)

Tom answered a series of interview questions by educator Simon Taylor. Some key ideas from Tom's responses include:

- Understanding the context of a student's personal journey is important.
- Senior secondary was engaging as it provided subjects of special interest. Year Levels 8-10 were not as engaging for Tom who struggled with processing information and speech.
- 'Ableism' is an embedded issue in secondary schooling despite accommodations being made. Support is not just about providing extra time but using different approaches and angles to meet specific student needs. For example, simplifying questions and reducing content to its core meaning would have helped Tom to process information and increased his engagement in school.

Student Perspectives on Enablers and Constraints of Schools for Neurodivergent Young People
A panel of seven students from Plenty River College and Footscray High School were interviewed by Nic Price, Learning Specialist from Footscray High School. The students shared their personal experiences related to inclusion in secondary schools, especially in relation to neurodivergent students. The questions and responses were structured to evaluate inclusion in relation to the themes of: place, people and practice. These categories are used to summarise key points from the discussion:

Place

- Open-plan designs of classrooms in secondary schools create issues related to noise and the distraction of students walking around.
- Neurodivergent students in particular would like a variety of learning spaces such as quiet spaces, homely spaces that feel well used and personalised by students, reflecting student input and designed to meet the needs of neurodivergent students. Currently, open-plan spaces felt 'hospital like' in their minimalist design.
- Open-plan was seen as having value in primary schools to promote group learning across year levels but was not well suited to secondary schools which have different specialised subjects being taught in the same space.

People

- The central role of the teacher in promoting inclusion was a theme across student responses. Teachers were described as having an authority role and power which enabled them to advocate to school leadership for student needs, voice and choice. Teacher authority also had a negative aspect with some students experiencing anxiety from teachers excusing bullying and having a controlling pedagogical approach.
- Teachers who were casual, relatable and with a sense of humour were appreciated by the students. More diversity of teachers was recommended, especially neurodivergent teachers.
- The analogy of teacher as a gymnastics coach was presented, with coaches having small groups and time to provide specific tailored help and having core qualities of energy and enthusiasm. Senior secondary, like an out-of-school club, has the advantage of students attending because they have an interest in learning specialised skills. This was not the case in junior secondary schooling (Year Levels 7-9).

Practice

- Students have a need for interactive, casual, social learning but teachers rely a lot on computers for learning (especially after remote learning from COVID-19).
- Even though individual learning may make things easier for autistic students, some of these students learn better from social interactions and discussions with peers in a physical classroom environment.
- Teachers can foster student engagement by clarifying the purpose of learning with reasons for tasks explained as well as allowing student choice in the mode and topic of assignments. For example, allowing students to tailor an assignment topic to their own interest and having open-ended tasks.

Brainstorming and Visualising Enablers, Constraints and the Future of Inclusive Education

Session 1 of the workshop examined current practice in schools to promote inclusivity.

Attendees of the forum were divided into three groups to brainstorm enablers and constraints of inclusive education across three categories: People, Place and Practice. Post-It notes were used to record attendee comments.
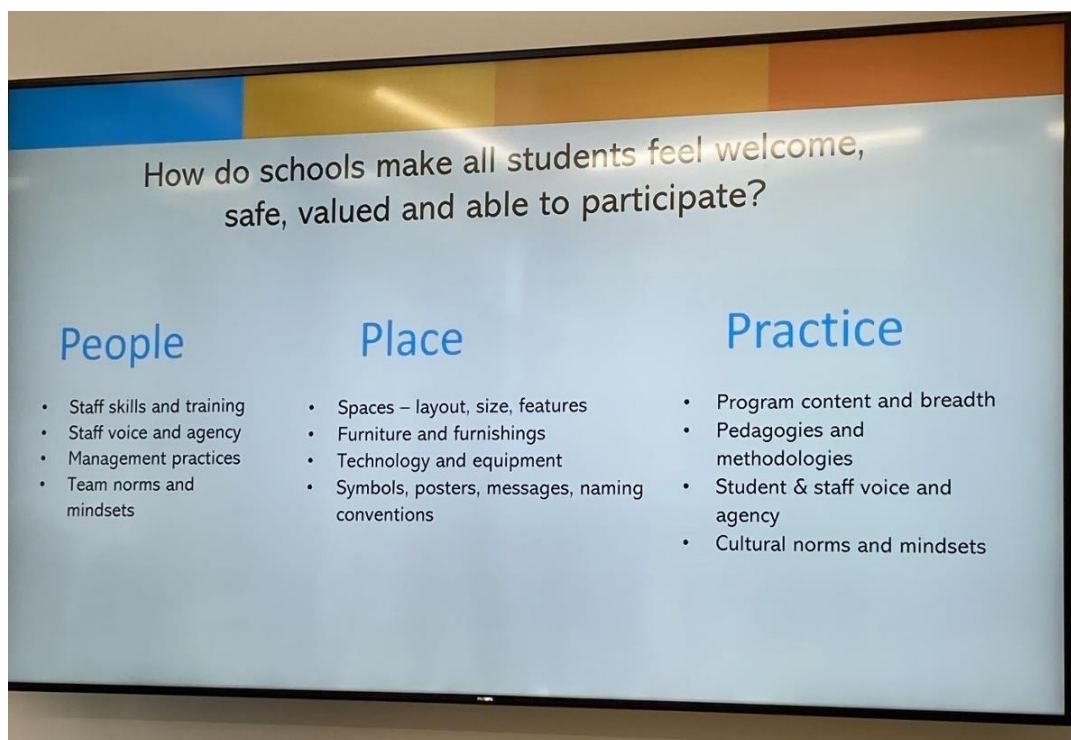
Categories used to prompt brainstorming on improving inclusion in schools

Session 2 of the workshop explored what could be done differently in schools to make all students feel welcome, safe, valued and able to participate. This group exploration was undertaken though a LEGO Serious Play activity to design a 'Space School' set in the future that would enable more inclusive education. Individual LEGO models were assembled into a larger group 'super story' to explore synergies in people's concepts.

Example of a LEGO super story used for visualising an inclusive 'Space School'

A summary of all Post-It note comments for enablers and constraints is provided below as well as a summary of ideas recorded on Post-It notes as part of the 'Space School' LEGO build.

Summary of Enablers into Themes

People	Place	Practice
• Schools that have an inclusive culture that value diversity of teachers and students. • Staff with understanding and respect about different learner needs and take on training in inclusion, diversity and mental health as a professional learning community. • Having time to build relationships and connections with students, families and communities.	• Schools with alternative learning environments including smaller breakout spaces for quieter group work, sensory friendly lighting and sensory toys. • Safe spaces owned by students reflecting a positive, colourful, fun and interactive learning environment that celebrates diversity. • More student transition experiences, communication and visits to secondary and senior secondary schools.	• Schools with flexible and agile structures/policies/curriculum that can adapt to individual student needs, voice and choice in decisions and their learning pathways. • Wellbeing support for students including having teachers with knowledge about neurodivergence, trauma, gender and religion. • Schools with a willingness to rethink the purpose of education and to try new things.

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Summary of Constraints into Themes

People	Place	Practice
• Teachers are under pressure with time and resource constraints which impacts their capacity for PD training. This leads to burnout and teacher shortages (especially in Year Levels 7-10). • Lack of respect by some staff for diverse students leading to discrimination, bullying, racism, transphobia and labelling. • Communication issues between teachers, families and students such as overly brief conferences and not following up on student voice.	• Lack of funding for school building improvements, extra-curricular events and activities. • Open-plan learning environments create learning issues due to noise and a clinical feel. • Issues related to place such as transport, school location, community partnerships and City of Whittlesea lacking youth spaces.	• Some schools still reflect a culture that aims to fit students into a factory model by not taking-on student opinions, not providing a purpose for learning, rushing communication with families and not adapting to new ways of doing things. • There is inconsistency in teacher knowledge of neurodiversity including behaviours and specific needs resulting in inappropriate and inconsistent school policies.

Summary of Ideas for Inclusive Education in a Future 'Space School'

People	Place	Practice
• Different pathways and support for learning in and beyond school. • Stronger connections and more communication between school, family and community. • Promote a culture that breaks down barriers.	• Incorporate diverse types of learning environments with plenty of windows such as green spaces, creative spaces, fun spaces, wellbeing areas and quiet breakout rooms. • Have learning environments that reflect values of welcomeness, accessibility, inclusion, freedom, equity and sustainability.	• Foster learning for capabilities such as emotional intelligence, resilience, relaxation and appreciation of diversity. • Build connections between schools and industries, communities and families. • Have flexible delivery of curriculum through technology and mobile access out of school hours.

Plenary Session

Simon Taylor provided a summary of the forum from the perspective of an educator through the following reflective questions:

- Who are you becoming as a teacher?
- Why are we educating in this way as teachers?
- Why are we learning this as students?
- How can we promote greater flexibility in the delivery of content, space and diversity of teachers and students?
- How can we apply these themes to our own practices to personalise learning?

Kim Stadtmiller officially concluded the event prior to networking with the following message (summarised):

The post-pandemic crisis highlights the gaps in existing practices and policies. Moving forward from the forum requires proactively listening to young people and acting by sharing their voices and the voices of educators to Government, to inform policies. A key step is creating a shared narrative to raise awareness of a greater need for social inclusion of diverse students in education.

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Event Evaluation Survey

27 attendees completed a paper-based survey at the end of the event. Results were transferred to a digital platform by recreating the survey and manually copying responses to the survey on Question Pro.

Key Findings from the Survey

- Most attendees rated the event as very valuable or extremely valuable
- Specific aspects of value for attendees were hearing from the panel of young people and Tom Quick as well as discussions with other attendees to network, share ideas and workshop possible solutions to issues of inclusivity in education
- Most attendees rated the range of activities as good or excellent
- Activities or aspects of most interest/most helpful for attendees were the LEGO Serious Play activity to model an inclusive future school and listening to the student panel
- All attendees believed the forum included ideas and activities that interested them professionally
- Most attendees felt that they had learnt new things about inclusivity best practice. About one fifth of attendees felt neutral about this
- Most attendees felt they had gained more practical tools to increase inclusivity in their workplace/ classroom. Around one fifth of attendees felt neutral about this
- All except one attendee felt that they had developed good connections with others they met at the forum
- All attendees stated they would like to attend future events and networking activities on inclusive education that develop from this forum
- General comments and suggestions to improve the event included appreciation for the opportunity to hear from and converse with young people and other guests; a desire to learn more about best practices in inclusive education in the region; more diversity of student cohorts could be represented; and having an opportunity to know who was in the room at the start of the event would have helped with networking

Summary from Survey

Overall, the attendees of the Inclusive Education Forum appreciated the event as a conversation starter, with opportunities to hear from young people and other guests, and to take part in hands on activities to explore future ideas for greater inclusion in schools. More opportunities to learn about best practice and a broader spectrum of diversity of learners represented would be valued in a future event.

Conclusion

The 2023 Inclusive Education Forum is a key step towards developing strategic partnerships for the improvement of education practice and policies to foster greater diversity and inclusivity in schools and education more broadly. The forum builds from previous collaborative work including renewal of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment 3-Year Action Plan, establishment of a WYC Strategic Advisory Group and a Spirit of Co-Operation Agreement. This report has collated data collected by the Whittlesea Tech School from the Inclusive Education Forum towards supporting next steps including an Inclusive Education Action Plan.

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