



Education



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09

School experiences of students with moderate and high support needs in NSW schools: My Say My Way

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Research Brief

What is the problem?

Children with disabilities have the right to have their views heard and to shape decisions on matters concerning them (the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1998; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006), but research shows that students with moderate and high support needs have limited opportunities to have a say about their education and wellbeing in school (Byrnes & Rickards, 2011; Chandroo et al., 2018; Greathead et al., 2016; Lyons & Cassebohm, 2012). Established approaches (interviews, traditional surveys) can be challenging for students with moderate and high support needs who may have a shorter attention span, anxiety providing responses, and vocabulary that is more limited (Woodcock et al., 2013).

There is a clear gap in NSW, in Australia, and world-wide, in mechanisms to enable students with moderate and high support needs to have a voice about their education. This trial utilised co-design and co-production principles with key stakeholders (Figure 1) to address this gap.

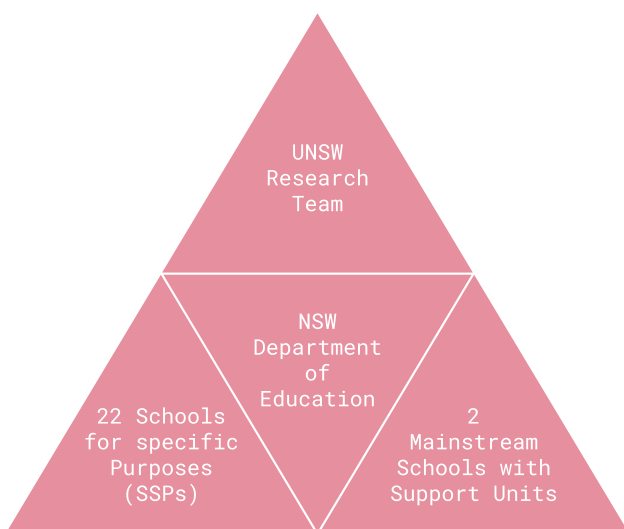


Figure 1 Co-design and co-production team

What we did about it

The suite of accessible methodologies: My Say My Way (MSMW) was developed to give a supported opportunity to students with moderate and high support needs to express their experience of education (Strnadová et al., 2020). MSMW consists of:

- **Surveys.** 3 versions of the survey were made, each adapted to a different level of support need.
- **Photovoice.** A process using photo images to capture aspects of a student's environment and experiences to share with others.
- **Body mapping.** An activity where students are guided to make a life-size outline of themselves which they fill with images, symbols and words representative of their experiences.

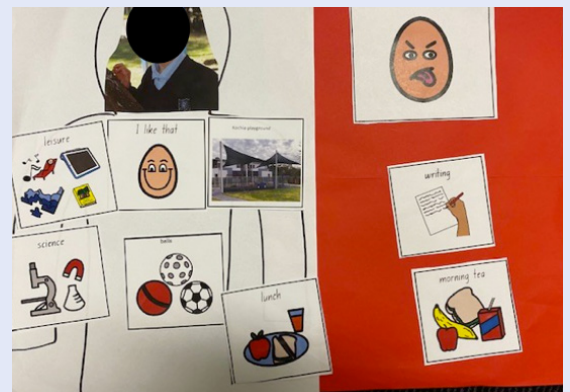


Figure 2 An example of body mapping by a student

MSMW offers an alternative to the NSW Department of Education's, Tell Them From Me, which is inaccessible to students with disability who have moderate and high support needs.

The student population which will benefit from this accessible methodology is significant: 36,718 school-aged students will benefit from the accessible survey and methods, representing 4.5% of the school population. Graph 1 shows a breakdown of these students. This is a critical mass of students who have historically had limited voice about their education, preferences and opinions.

What we found

The trial provided unprecedented insight into the educational experiences of students with moderate and high support needs and provides information for the first time in NSW about what these students like about their education experience. Students completing the MSMW methodologies reported an overall positive experience in their schools (Table 1 and 2).

Students to benefit from accessible methodology

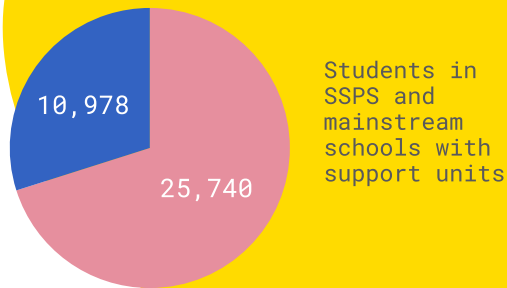


Table 1 MSMW survey (completed by 49 students from 15 schools in Version 1 and 121 students from 21 schools in Version 2) – What students told us

Graph 1 Students to benefit from accessible methodology

Domain	Findings	Key highlights
Academic Domain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers help students. Students like learning new things at school. Only about 57% students were aware of their learning goals and 49% of the students were involved in setting them. 	It is critical to involve students in goal setting as students need to develop their self-advocacy skills through involvement in setting learning goals for themselves (e.g., transition and post-school goals).
Wellbeing Domain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority liked their school and felt a sense of belonging and pride about their school. Students disliked feeling scared and being yelled at (37 students). 	To foster a positive classroom climate, teachers could be more aware of their tone and volume of voice used in class to ensure that students do not perceive it as yelling.
Positive Learning Climate Domain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority were motivated to attend school. Students felt they were doing well at school. A significant proportion of students felt bored at school. 	The boredom of some students at school suggests a need for more academically challenging activities. This is an important finding which rebuts a common misconception about students with moderate and high support needs, that they have limited capacity to learn academically.

Table 2 MSMW Photovoice and body mapping (completed by 138 students across 19 schools) – What students told us

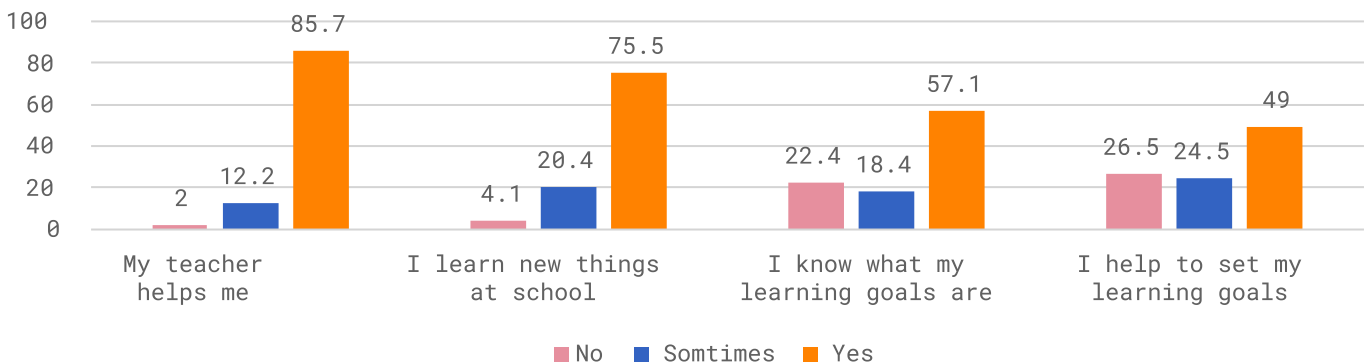
Findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students most liked physical activities at school and generally enjoyed leisure and toys at school as well as academic classes and learning activities. Their key dislikes were similar to their likes including academic classes and physical activities. Commonly they disliked yelling (7 students), noise (6 students) and fighting at school (4 students).

Why it matters?

The trial outcomes provide a strong case for the importance, appropriateness and efficacy of MSMW in providing a mechanism to enable the voice of students with moderate and high support needs in a small sample of NSW public schools. Additionally, the trial has opened up the strong potential of MSMW for use on different levels including in the classroom, at an individual school, and across the education system.

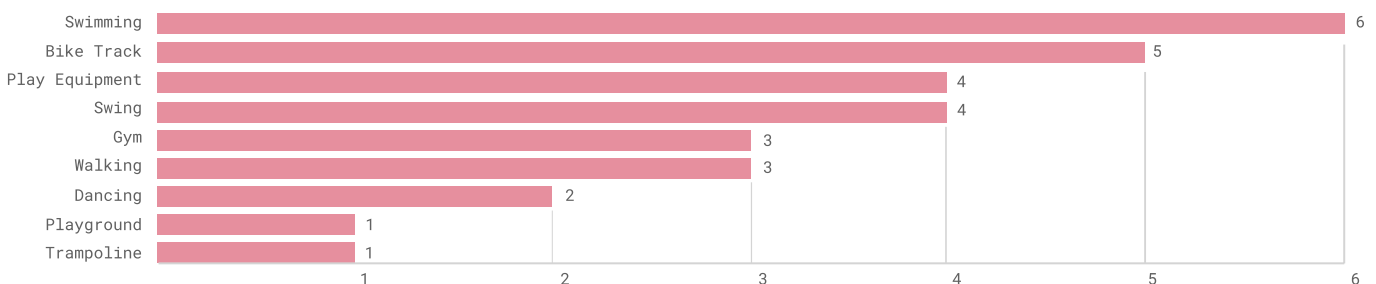
Academic Domain

Classroom level: Student data (Graph 2) can inform teacher decision-making in setting learning goals



Physical activities and places (school 10, 10 students)

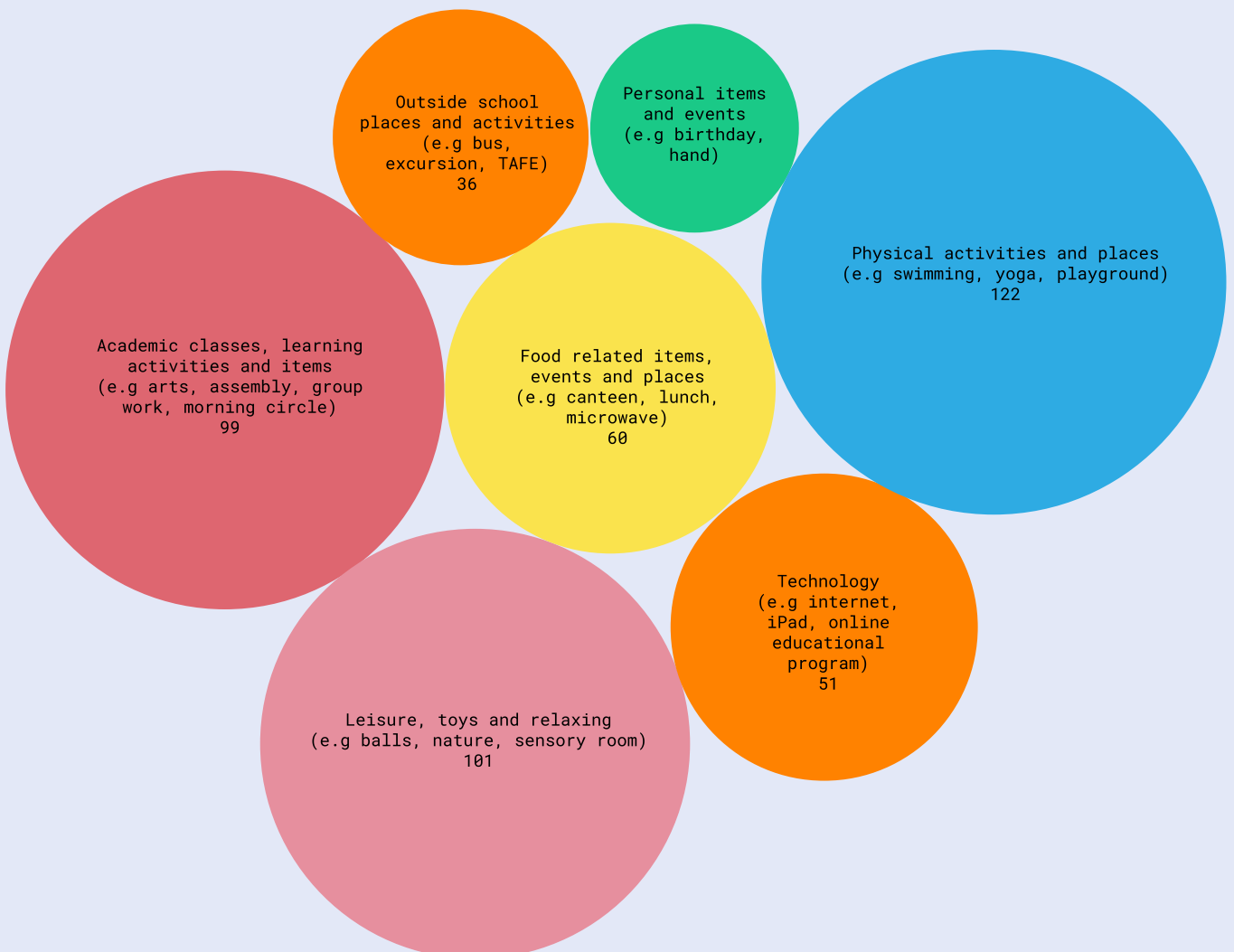
School level: Student data (Graph 3) can inform school planning in providing students with meaningful and enjoyable experiences.





Education system

Education system level: Student data (Figure 2) can identify strategic support for schools to target the areas of student preferences.



About the Researchers



Iva Strnadová

Iva Strnadová, PhD, is a Professor in Special Education and Disability Studies at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. She is also Academic Lead Research at the Disability Innovation Institute at the UNSW. Her research aims to contribute to better understanding and the improvement of the life experiences of people with disabilities, especially people with intellectual disabilities. Combining research with advocacy is essential in her research program, which builds on supporting the self-determination (including self-advocacy) of people with intellectual disabilities, and is grounded in an innovative inclusive research approach. Further details are available at [Disability and me blog](#), Disability and me Facebook page, and Twitter @IvaStrnadova.



Leanne Dowse

Leanne Dowse, PhD, is Emeritus Professor in Disability Studies at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. She is also Associate Director at the Disability Innovation Institute at UNSW. Her work spans an interdisciplinary program of research in disability aimed at creating knowledge to build capacity to address issues for people with cognitive disability who experience complex intersectional disadvantage, people with complex behaviour support needs and those in contact with the criminal justice.



Brydan Lenne

Brydan Lenne, PhD, is Leader Strategic Initiatives and Reform at the NSW Department of Education. Her work and research interests include using innovative methods to explore educational, diagnostic and clinical trial settings with young people with disabilities, and enabling both parents and young people to have their voice heard.



Joanne Danker

Joanne Danker is a lecturer in Special Education in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales. She specialises in the well-being of students with developmental disabilities (i.e., autism spectrum and intellectual disabilities), inclusive and special education, and enabling the voices of individuals with disabilities in research. Further details of her work can be found at <https://research.unsw.edu.au/people/dr-joanne-cherie-danker>



Dennis Alonzo

Dennis Alonzo is a lecturer in assessment, evaluation and teacher development. He has an extensive track record in establishing the dimensions of various constructs. He has developed the teacher assessment for learning literacy tool, findings from which were used to develop the empirically-driven framework for defining and describing teacher assessment literacy. The tool has been contextualised for EAL/D teachers and for higher education. As an ECR, he has been involved in many national and international research projects totally ~\$2.5M. Further details of his work can be found [here](#).



Scott Eacott

Scott Eacott PhD, is Professor and Deputy Head of School, Research in the School of Education | Research Fellow in the Gonski Institute for Education at UNSW Sydney and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. He leads an interdisciplinary research program that seeks to develop tools for educators, schools and systems to better understand the provision of schooling through relational theory. His distinctive relational approach that has led to invitations to run workshops and give talks in Norway, Canada, the USA, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, and throughout Australia. Scott has authored > 100 publications, led major research projects (funding- \$3.7M) and successfully translated his research into policy and practice. You can connect with him on Twitter [@ScottEacott](#)



Julie Loblinzk

Julie Loblinzk, is a Self-advocacy Coordinator at Self Advocacy Sydney, Inc. She is also an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. In her role, she lectures to undergraduate and postgraduate students about topics such as self-advocacy and parenting with intellectual disability. She is also involved in inclusive research and is currently working with Prof Iva Strnadová on numerous research studies. Further details of her work can be found at [Disability and me blog](#) and Disability and me Facebook page.



Michelle Tso

Michelle Tso, is a PhD student at the University of New South Wales. Her PhD thesis is on the peer interactions of female high school students on the autism spectrum. She is supervised by Professor Iva Strnadová, Dr Sue O'Neill and Dr Joanne Danker. Her research interests are in inclusive and special education, and especially in supporting students on the autism spectrum to have increased well-being in the school environment and beyond. She is a research assistant on projects at the University of New South Wales (School of Education, and the Disability Innovation Institute). Further details of her work can be found at [Google Scholar](#)

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For more information

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Special and Inclusive Education Research Group

Research into special and inclusive education aims to understand and respond to the needs of students with a lived experience of disability. An associated research team at UNSW – the Special and Inclusive Education Research Group (SIERG) – seeks to engage with the wider community of schools, people with disability, and service providers with the goal of improving the outcomes of people with disability at all stages of education. SIERG membership is comprised of prominent researchers, higher degree research students, educators, and people with lived experience of disability. Much of this research is accomplished through participatory and inclusive research, action research, and community consultation.