

Reimagining Inclusion: Education Reform for Twice-Exceptional Students in Post-Royal Commission Australia

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the systemic exclusion of twice-exceptional (2e) students, those who are both gifted and disabled, within the Australian education system, with a particular focus on the senior secondary stage and the Higher School Certificate (HSC). A triangulated mixed-methods design was employed, combining an online questionnaire (n = 60), two focus group interviews in mainstream and specialised school environments, and expert interviews with academic and political leaders in the field. The findings reveal entrenched structural barriers in mainstream education, including inflexible curricula, inaccessible provisions and a culture of compliance that disadvantages neurodivergent learners. Social stigma, policy gaps and gendered disparities in access to support were also identified as significant obstacles to educational attainment. Participants consistently reported severe mental health impacts, including hospitalisation, exhaustion and long-term trauma, stemming from institutional neglect. Visions for reform articulated by students and experts converged on the importance of Universal Design for Learning, collective accessibility and a diversification of assessment practices beyond high-stakes examinations. While debate persists regarding the future of specialised schools, findings highlight the need for both safe spaces and systemic reform in mainstream contexts. This study underscores the urgency of student-led reform and contributes to the broader discourse on disability justice, educational equity and the reimagining of inclusive schooling in Australia.

Introduction

General consensus in the disabled community describes Australia's education system as flawed and discriminatory, with attrition rates for those living with a disability significantly higher than those of their able-bodied and neurotypical peers. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024) Under the current model of senior school, years of learning are compressed into standardised exam sittings, where students' academic worth is tested through rote learning, memory-based performance. This paper will explore the impacts the Higher School Certificate (HSC) system is having on students' mental health and sense of self worth.

It will further examine Australia's current educational landscape and how cultural perceptions and political policies have historically shaped the treatment and inclusion of twice-exceptional students. Twice-exceptional students, also known as 2e students, are individuals who demonstrate both giftedness and a learning disability or other developmental challenge. By comparing the perspectives of twice-exceptional students in mainstream and specialised educational settings, this thesis aims to analyse students' academic, social and psychological outcomes. It is hypothesised that twice-exceptional students face significant challenges in completing secondary schooling due to inadequate support structures, entrenched cultural stigmas, and insufficient policy responses.

This research seeks to gain greater insight into the high attrition rates of twice-exceptional high school students in Australia, and to contribute meaningfully to the broader discussion of the systematic failures of our education system.

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A 2015 study (North) revealed that nearly half of the students who sat the HSC exhibited clinically concerning levels of anxiety. This anxiety is further compounded by existing inequities for students living with disabilities. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), only 34% of Australians aged 20 and over with a disability had completed Year 12 or its equivalent. These figures underscore a broader national conversation, catalysed by the 2023 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, which controversially recommended phasing out specialised schools. This literature review engages with that debate, offering insight into the structural positioning of twice-exceptional (2e) students and the systemic forces that shape their inclusion or exclusion within Australian education.

2.2 Framing the system

Connell (2013) contends that the Australian education system, as an institution of the capitalist state, reinforces societal hierarchies by dividing children into categories of class and ability through private, public, and selective streams of schooling. Although a wide variety of educational models exist, these often cater to distinct social groups which reinforce existing inequalities. Connell is highly critical of what he calls the “neoliberal cascade” on Australian education, a series of policy decisions established in the mid-1980s. His critique of the marketisation of education extends across all levels, from pre-school to tertiary-level institutions; however, this review focuses specifically on secondary schooling. Connell highlights the entrenchment of competitive testing at both the state and national levels, despite growing evidence of the cultural and social biases inherent in standardised examinations.

Instead, this system gives way to the commodification of educational institutions, deepening inequity and generational poverty. Connell himself demonstrates a political bias toward left-wing ideologies, particularly through his criticisms of Rupert Murdoch's media monopoly and the broader influence of conservative political narratives on education policy.

Similarly, Lingard (2010) situates Australia's education policy within a broader neoliberal project. Like Connell, he identifies key ideological shifts in the late 20th century that encouraged selective enrolment practices and increased market competition. However, he is particularly critical of the Rudd Government's national schooling agenda and the 2010 launch of the *My School* website. Despite its intent to provide transparency, the platform was met with significant opposition from educators and teachers' unions. Strong support from the Murdoch press further fuelled perceptions that these reforms were driven by political and market interests, rather than a genuine commitment to educational equity. Lingard also critiques the reliance on high-stakes testing, arguing that such regimes adversely impact pedagogy and curriculum, particularly in low-economic status (SES) schools. His work diverges from that of other academics through his study of the pitfalls of "policy borrowing" from countries such as the United States. He notes that the cultural and historical differences between the two systems render imported strategies ineffective in the Australian context. The underlying assumption in these policies — that competition between schools and parental market choice would drive quality — has not held up to scrutiny, as numerous studies have highlighted.

Furthermore, Lingard (2010) offers an alternative inspiration for Australia's educational system by highlighting the inclusive structure and pedagogy of Finnish schools. He argues that adopting a similar approach could enable Australian students to achieve stronger outcomes as a collective. He praises the academic rigour of Finland's education system and its fully publicly owned status. However, as the

article was published in 2010, its contemporary relevance is somewhat limited. Nevertheless, Lingard's conclusions, particularly his hopes for an equitable non-government school funding regime to be introduced by the Federal government by 2012, remain important as historical evidence. They offer insight into the policy ambitions and ideological debates shaping educational reform during that period. Notably, fifteen years after Lingard's sentiment, the 2025 Federal Government has only now announced that NSW public schools will receive an additional A\$4.8 billion in federal funding over the next decade.

Echoing Lingard and Connell's scholarship on the political economy of education, Karisa's (2022) comparative critique of traditional public education in relation to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) argues that policymakers and politicians, "who rule countries in service to large corporations" (p. 196), have built education systems prioritising standardisation, conformity, and economic productivity over genuine inclusivity. She suggests that the rhetoric of equal opportunity is a fallacy when equity is absent and when educational success depends on a student's ability to conform to narrow behavioural and cognitive norms. This analysis holds significant implications for twice-exceptional students, who often fall outside these rigid expectations. The system's reliance on high-stakes testing and isolated benchmarks disproportionately disadvantages students whose strengths and disabilities co-exist, with disability overshadowing giftedness or vice versa. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power, Karisa (2022) contends that education enforces a regime in which students are sorted, ranked and rewarded according to their ability to perform within these constructed norms. This sorting process perpetuates social hierarchies, echoing Social Darwinist notions that marginalise the perceived weak in pursuit of economically "productive" citizens.

Elaborating on this, Kantrowitz (2022) argues that social stratification within classrooms is not incidental but deeply ingrained in modern society, justified through evolutionary theories of 'Social Darwinism' and

'eugenics'. These social theories, which emerged by the end of the 19th century, urged actions to prevent people with disabilities from reproducing by segregating them from society. Social Darwinism is underpinned by a rigid commitment to biological determinism, where deviations from cognitive or physical "norms" are pathologized and punished rather than accommodated for. Kantrowitz describes how pervasive assumptions about intellectual inferiority and asexuality have led to the infantilisation of disabled people, a dynamic mirrored in school settings when twice-exceptional students are denied academic extension due to their disability, or denied disability support due to their giftedness. The institutionalised nature of this erasure parallels how eugenicist ideology sought to "correct" or contain disabled people, with modern education systems enacting a soft form of exclusion through rigid streaming, inadequate policy frameworks, and a lack of inclusive pedagogy. Therefore, the historical entanglement of ableism and eugenics explained by Kantrowitz (2022) offers critical insight into why twice-exceptional students remain systemically marginalised — caught between competing identities in a system still structured around normative assumptions of ability.

The disabled community's perspective of the mainstream education system describes a lack of inclusive pedagogy and unwillingness to accommodate twice-exceptional students, placing immense pressure on family units and taking a significant toll on individuals. This is highlighted in academia through the Commonwealth of Australia's (2016) inquiry into access to learning for students with disability, which received several submissions on gatekeeping practices in Australian schools. Gatekeeping is defined as a strategy used by power holders to create, mobilise, recreate, and reinforce structural barriers, such as access to education. The article *Gatekeeping and Restrictive Practices by Australian Mainstream Schools: Results of a National Survey* (Poed et al., 2022) corroborates this, with findings indicating 70% of the family's report having experienced gatekeeping or restrictive practices. This study also highlighted lesser-known strategies of gatekeeping, including forced partial attendance and trauma-inducing

restrictive interventions like physical, chemical, and mechanical restraint. The research of Poed and colleagues provides insight into the graphic and violent nature of school-based intervention techniques, often hidden from mainstream pedagogical debate.

2.3 Inclusive education in Australia

Anderson and Boyle's (2019) reflection on the 25 years since the Salamanca Statement is a rare and valuable contribution, given the limited historical accounts of inclusive education in Australia. It should be noted that the fluidity of policy ideology and the fragmented nature of state-based systems have made consistent documentation challenging. The Salamanca Statement, adopted in 1994, is a global framework advocating for inclusive education as a fundamental right for all children, regardless of their individual needs or disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). While Australia publicly endorsed the policy, Anderson and Boyle argue that its recommendations have been inconsistently enacted, hindered by neoliberal policy structure, insufficient co-design, and the persistence of segregated practices. They critique the inclusionist claim that "no distinction should be made between students with and without disability," suggesting that such rhetoric, without systematic reform, fails to improve educational quality for students with disability.

This lack of progress is evident in more recent inquiries, notably the Australian Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2019-2023). The Commission delivered 222 recommendations drawn from public hearings, private consultations, and submissions. Recommendation 7.1 calls for schools to maintain records on school refusal and enrolment cancellation, subject to independent review. This aligns with literature describing how gatekeeping practices reinforce exclusion in the current system. If implemented, such measures could give families avenues to challenge exclusionary decisions; however, the mixed track record of Royal Commission

recommendations raises uncertainty about their long-term impact. The most contentious proposal, Recommendation 7.14, advocates for phasing out special schools by 2051, a decision that has been highly criticised by parents, specialised educators and advocates and has reignited debate over whether full inclusion is achievable within mainstream schooling.

Cumming and colleagues (2024) examine this controversy, noting that even the Commissioners themselves were split. The authors adopt a clear position, describing the recommendation to remove specialised schools as narrow-minded, expensive, and unrealistic. They argue that special schooling is an essential component of an inclusive education system, offering safe, specialist environments for some of Australia's most vulnerable students. Cumming and colleagues also identify a gap in longitudinal research comparing outcomes for students with disabilities in specialised and mainstream settings, which is a notable omission given the policy stakes. Although the article's stance is explicit, it is grounded in qualitative examples, statistics, and cites many of the same sources reviewed within this paper, highlighting its relevance to current debates.

2.4 Twice-exceptionality: The intersection between giftedness and disability

The defining of twice-exceptionality is subject to debate, with no single explanation universally recognised. For the purposes of this article, twice-exceptional individuals are defined as those who are both gifted and have one or more learning disabilities or other neurodevelopmental conditions. It is important to acknowledge the intersectional complexity which arises from the interplay of what society deems to be opposing characteristics. This paradigm leads to unique challenges in identification, support, and education for children with twice-exceptionality. This section will cover both pedagogical perspectives of what best aligns with the needs of these children, and prevalence perspectives.

Gierczyk and Hornby's (2021) systematic review of 15 articles published between 2000 and 2020 provides a comprehensive, relevant overview of the research area. In relation to methodology, the authors used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) protocol, a valuable, widely recognised tool that ensures quality and transparency. The authors' findings were split into teacher-focused and student-focused subsections, however, for the purposes of this literature review, only generalised international findings and those specific to Australia are discussed in depth. Of the 15 studies reviewed, only three were Australian and seven were American, reflecting a predominantly Western and particularly U.S. centric focus, which limits the direct applicability of the findings to the Australian educational context.

Analysis showed that teachers were more successful in their communication with, and understanding of twice-exceptional students after undertaking appropriate courses. However, Wormald and Bannister-Tyrrell (2021) highlighted the consistent failures of schools to identify twice-exceptional students and, therefore, the lack of specific educational needs being met, concluding that limited numbers of teachers are accessing the courses mentioned. This review described teachers' inconsistent knowledge, understanding, and feelings of not being prepared to teach twice-exceptional students (Rowan & Townend, 2016). Furthermore, Gierczyk and Hornby pointed to teachers' focus on students' weaknesses over strengths as an area of concern. This is specifically concerning as Townend and Pendergast (2015) found that students' academic self-concept was paramount to their achievement and wellbeing, and that with students perceiving teachers as highly important in their lives, this understanding of identity often stems from educators. Negative rhetoric specific to twice-exceptional students, particularly in comparison to their gifted peers, appears to contribute significantly to mental health deterioration and school refusal within this community.

Overall, the systematic review found that greater preparation of teachers was needed, with a focus on evidence-based strategies, including frameworks like Universal Design for Learning. Through creating inclusive environments that focus on both developing the strengths of students and addressing their difficulties, students' quality of life will likely increase. Notably, the authors conclude that children with disabilities should be educated in the most suitable setting, ranging from mainstream classrooms to special schools, depending on their needs at different stages. In line with this, they argue that twice-exceptional students can thrive across diverse inclusive contexts, provided they have access to both gifted and special education programs. This position into the full inclusivist and special settings debate is unusually centrist, focusing on individualised needs and the changing nature of support throughout one's childhood. However, it is clear that the authors still regard special settings as having a place within the paradigm of Australian education.

Ronksley-Pavia (2020) authored a rare piece of quantitative research within the niche of Australian twice-exceptional academia, given the difficulties of accessing 2e participants due to under-identification and the lack of universally accepted definitions of disability, giftedness, and their intersection. Ronksley-Pavia's work seeks to amend this by emphasising the importance of quantification as governments rely on statistical evidence-based strategies when developing policy. Furthermore, she discussed how other literature focused only on classroom provisions and teacher knowledge which cannot be effectively mandated without clear information on how many children need to be supported.

Ronksley-Pavia has been studying twice-exceptional students for over a decade with her first estimation of the prevalence in 2014 (Ronksley-Pavia, 2020). In 2020, she updated this number, using the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) student enrolment data. To identify the

number of students with disability from the cohort of 3,948,811 students enrolled in Australian schools, the educational adjustments for disability (19.9% of the cohort) data was used. This approach is limited as it does not consider students who do not receive provisions, the masking effects of giftedness/disability, and students with undiagnosed disabilities; however, she addresses these in her limitation section. Ronksley-Pavia then used François Gagné's conservative estimate — that 10% of the general population is gifted — to calculate the number of twice-exceptional students, as there is no mandated collection on the number of Australian children who are regarded as gifted. Ronksley-Pavia (2020) concludes the number of twice-exceptional students in Australia may range from 78,668 to 283,204 (lower bound 2% to upper 7%).

Although this research is highly important, its validity and accuracy should be questioned. There is significant variance internationally, with past research estimating that 2% to 30% of gifted students exhibit a learning disability. Furthermore, she does not address students who may no longer be enrolled in school due to lack of support, which is a flaw in the methodology, and fails to acknowledge the giftedness prevalence rate (10%) is itself contested and culturally dependent. Overall, however the methodology is reasonable for producing a rough estimate in a data-poor environment, but the figures should only be treated as indicative ranges rather than definitive.

2.5 Neurodivergence and gendered exclusion

Gendered exclusion is a common practice, particularly relevant within the disabled community, with perpetuated stereotypes and research gaps significantly shaping the experiences of twice-exceptional females and gender-diverse students. This section examines the experiences of neurodivergent females in both mainstream environments and Pupil Referral Units (PRU). A PRU is a type of school or educational setting designed to support students who are struggling in mainstream schools and is one of

the most common models of special education in the United Kingdom. It is important to note that research is extremely limited in this area with male prevalence in autism diagnoses leading to an underrepresentation of female perspectives. An early feminine advantage, the ability to socially mask, allows for females with autism to assimilate with their primary school peers and delays recognition until the developmental changes of adolescence.

Sproston and colleagues (2017) *Autistic Girls and School Exclusion: Perspectives of Students and Their Parents* offer significant insight into the perspectives of adolescent females with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other co-occurring conditions, and their difficulties in secondary school. The UK-based qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews with eight autistic girls (six formally diagnosed) and their parents. The interviews explored topics of mainstream schooling experiences, alternative provision, exclusion processes, and special schooling. Once data was collected, thematic analysis highlighted three core themes: inappropriate school environments, strained school relationships, and poor staff responses.

The participants showed a strong preference for Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) education, describing smaller, quieter spaces that better aligned with their sensory needs. They valued the empathic, personalised teaching they received in specialised environments, citing teachers' interest in them as individuals and the opportunities provided to explore their interests. In comparison, tensions in relationships within mainstream environments — with peers, teachers and school authorities — were significantly greater than in PRU's and caused stress for both parents and students. Descriptions of toxic culture were unanimous, with all participants sharing anecdotes of being shamed, shouted at, ridiculed and threatened. This resulted in a significant increase in anxiety, specifically around academic performance, which manifested in school refusal. Parents also described a sense of dread in dealing with mainstream

authorities and valued PRUs for the safety they provided to their child. However, societal stigmas surrounding the cohorts at PRU were evident in parents' perspectives, with concerns fuelled by stories they had heard.

Sproton and colleagues (2017) highlight the role of gender in exclusion processes for autistic students, with masking and social pressures exacerbating vulnerability. The research argues for the continued existence of specialised schooling; however, the UK context and the primary focus not being on diagnosed twice-exceptionality does limit the article's value. Furthermore, the small sample size limits generalisability, but offers rich, underexplored insights.

2.6 Intersectional insights and Indigenous perspectives

In relation to terminology, it should be noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities are not a monolith and use a range of words and phrases to describe their identity. For the purposes of this literature review, the wording will be dependent on the literature being discussed.

The Australian Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2019-2023) highlighted the systemic barriers facing First Nations people with disability, supported through evidence from the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN). Volume 9 is particularly significant as it documents the lived experiences of First Nations communities and challenges deficit-based narratives by foregrounding rights, dignity, and cultural identity.

A key theme raised was the clash between Indigenous and Western conceptions of disability. While Aboriginal perspectives emphasise cultural inclusivity and social and emotional wellbeing, education systems operate on deficit-based and medicalised approaches. This creates reluctance in communities

to pursue formal diagnosis, despite diagnosis being the key to unlocking school funding and accommodations. Disability support therefore requires reform that integrates cultural practice, prioritises wellbeing, and recognises diverse strengths.

The Commission also heard how schools often fail to accommodate the intersection of culture and disability. Mr Griffis, CEO of First Peoples Disability Network, described parents being forced to “choose” between identifying their child as Aboriginal or disabled when enrolling, as only one category may result in support. Such structural limitations deny students holistic recognition and lead to compounded discrimination. This was reflected in teachers’ and peers’ low expectations of First Nations students with disability, reinforcing deficit views. One First Nations woman told the Commission that it took her a decade to complete an undergraduate degree because of inadequate adjustments, with staff suggesting she should be “happy just to pass.” This rhetoric exemplifies how systemic racism and ableism diminish achievement by presuming limited potential.

Bullying and exclusionary discipline further compounded these disadvantages. Testimonies described Aboriginal students being called “stupid,” denied support and forced out of school. Exclusion often occurred through suspensions, shortened hours or requests for parents to collect children early rather than providing accommodations. Professor Linda Graham emphasised that students with disability, First Nations students, and those in foster care face the highest risk of exclusionary discipline due to intersectional disadvantage. She further highlighted the absence of publicly available data on suspensions and expulsions of students with disability. This absence is not because the data does not exist or that it is not collected, it's due to no school education provider in Australia publishing disaggregated information. This lack of transparency obscures the scale of the problem and blocks systemic reform.

Although there is no published research specific to twice-exceptional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia, this absence of evidence does not equate to an absence of existence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience higher rates of disability than the non-Indigenous population. In 2022, 25.3% (183,700 people) reported living with a disability, and 70.7% of those aged five years and over experiencing schooling or employment restrictions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Given this prevalence, it is statistically probable that a significant cohort of Aboriginal students who are both gifted and disabled is present within Australian schools.

Although not directly addressing twice-exceptional learners, this section of analysis offers insights into cultural conceptions of giftedness, identity tensions, and alternative models of success. The absence of targeted research is shaped by structural factors, including limited trust in government institutions, socioeconomic disadvantage, and a history of extractive and deficit-framed research with Aboriginal communities. Without empirical evidence, policy cannot be developed to address the educational needs of those most at risk of disengagement, including underestimated and under stimulated students in remote and regional areas. Furthermore, assumptions that disability or giftedness are unrecognised within Aboriginal languages and societies are inaccurate and rooted in paternalistic, infantilising stereotypes. In reality, Aboriginal cultures place immense value on diverse intellectual, creative, and practical abilities, but conceptualise and express them through frameworks distinct from mainstream Western schooling systems. Furthermore, the absence of discussion surrounding disability within this literature reflects a broader systemic blind spot, underscoring the importance of making this gap visible.

Thraves (2025) provides a unique perspective on the tension between an individual's academic aspirations and cultural identity. Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with a student 'Lucy', her mother, and English teacher. Lucy is a 15-year-old Yolŋu girl from East Arnhem Land

who boards at a school with two distinct streams: one catering to Aboriginal boarding students, focusing on improving English literacy and numeracy skills, and the other for local day students from Darwin. Despite her demographic, which would usually result in segregation within the context of this school, she has been considered capable of working at the level of the day students and completes all her learning within the mainstream environment of the institution. The participant is defined by her love of learning, with descriptions and anecdotes of her passion shared by both her mother and teacher. She also aspires to be a lawyer, which her teacher predicts will drive her to leave her community, and her mother states, “she’ll not be able to practice law out here.” Lucy reflects on this with self-awareness and strong morals, she describes “missing out”, her cultural knowledge “starting to fade” due to her presence at the boarding school and expresses this as a contributing factor in her decision whether to go to university. While Lucy is not twice-exceptional, her experience demonstrates the identity tensions, risks of cultural disconnection, and mainstream system expectations that would be compounded for Aboriginal students with both disabilities and giftedness. The author also acknowledges her positionality as a white middle-class woman in her mid-forties. Although this work is not ideal as evidence directly aligned with the focus of this literature review, it remains ethically and culturally informed. Guided by Yolŋu Elder Miriam Dhurrkay, a traditional Wangurri woman, it can be valued as a tool for amplifying the voice of a young person underrepresented in government policy.

Thraves et al. (2022), provides a pedagogical perspective to Lucy’s school. This study was conducted three years before the case study and at the time, no remote Aboriginal students had been selected into gifted and talented classes in over ten years of records. The study aimed by facilitated dialogue between three elders and three classroom teachers to co-construct the features of an educational model recognising both Yolŋu (Aboriginal) and non-Yolŋu (school-based) understandings of giftedness and talent development. The result was the Ganma metaphor, a useful framework for understanding how

both-ways models are conceptualised by the Yolŋu. Ganma is described as “the point where two distinct tributaries, one salt water (representing non-Aboriginal knowledge) and the other fresh water (representing Aboriginal knowledge) come together to form a lagoon.” The cultural giftedness co-design model emphasised the importance of community as a learning resource, the return of acquired knowledge back into the classroom, mentorship from Elders and community leaders, and the intercultural transmission of knowledge.

This literature highlights how First Nations students with disabilities face systemic barriers within education that are compounded by racism, ableism and cultural disconnection. While no research directly addresses twice-exceptional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the prevalence of disability within Indigenous communities makes their presence in schools statistically certain. The absence of evidence reflects structural inequities in research and policy rather than a lack of lived experience. Culturally informed models, such as the Ganma framework, demonstrate that Indigenous perspectives on knowledge, identity and giftedness can inform more inclusive and strengths-based approaches. Addressing these gaps requires education systems to move beyond deficit-based narratives, acknowledge diverse abilities and embed cultural frameworks that support both disability and giftedness within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

2.7 Literature Review Conclusion

The reviewed literature highlights that twice-exceptional students exist at the intersection of systemic inequities in the Australian education system, shaped by neoliberal policy frameworks, historical ideologies of ableism and eugenics, and persistent gaps in inclusive pedagogy. Structural analyses by Connell (2013), Lingard (2010) and Karisa (2022) depict the system as one that entrenches social hierarchies through marketisation, competitive testing, and reductive conceptions of ability, while

Kantrowitz (2022) situates these dynamics within a historical trajectory of disability exclusion. Empirical evidence from Poed and colleagues (2022) and the 2019-2023 Royal Commission further demonstrates that gatekeeping practices remain widespread, undermining the model of inclusive education envisioned in the Salamanca Statement.

Within the specific context of twice-exceptionality, studies by Gierczyk and Hornby (2021) and Ronksley-Pavia (2020) highlight chronic under-identification, inconsistent teacher preparation, and a lack of definitive prevalence data, all of which constrain policy and practice. These challenges are further compounded for neurodivergent females, gender-diverse and Indigenous students, who experience delayed diagnosis and exclusionary disciplinary cultures (Sproston et al., 2017; Thraves, 2022; Thraves, 2025). Across the literature, there is little consensus on whether special or mainstream schooling provides the most effective learning environments for twice-exceptional students. Centrist perspectives instead empathise the importance of flexible, individualised pathways that adapt over the course of a student's education.

This literature review emphasises the absence of sustained, longitudinal, and Australia-specific research into the lived experiences of twice-exceptional students across diverse educational settings, resulting in a policy-practice gap in implementing inclusive frameworks that address both giftedness and disability without erasing either. These gaps provide the rationale for the present research, which seeks to centre the voices of students and families to inform the development of inclusive, equitable, and contextually relevant education models in Australia.

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

An online exploratory questionnaire was distributed to the general public to collect foundational knowledge on societal stereotypes, beliefs and common experiences across both mainstream and specialised schooling environments, while individual and FGIs were conducted to gain ethnographic, personal perspectives regarding the current state of Australian schooling and what a future educational system built on lived experience and co-design could look like. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected across November 2024 in the Sydney metropolitan area of New South Wales (NSW). This study was reviewed and approved by academic supervisors, Hannah Czaban and Seren Wagstaff.

The positionality of this research is defined by its authorship: a senior secondary student undertaking an investigation into the experiences of twice-exceptional students, of which the author is one, with schooling experiences in both mainstream and specialised educational settings. The research was inspired by lived experience of navigating autism alongside the structural constraints of the Australian education system, shaping both the scope and focus of this study. The author's enrolment in a specialised setting allowed for the collection of highly personal and in-depth qualitative data. Furthermore, the peer-to-peer relationship between researcher and participants facilitated a level of openness and insight not reflected in existing literature. It is noted that expert interviewee, Professor Terry Cumming, subsequently became an academic mentor to the project, with a six month gap between data collection and this supervisory role. While this overlap introduces a potential conflict of interest, it also provides the opportunity to engage with one of the leading experts in the field. On balance, the benefits of youth-led, reflective research, particularly in relation to authenticity, depth of access and unique perspective, outweigh the limitations associated with purposive sampling and research positionality.

3.2 Questionnaire

Research design: The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms, following the preliminary research stage which discovered gaps within twice-exceptional research, specifically from a student-led lens. A mixed-methods approach was then employed, with the questions checked for ethical and relevance issues before approval. The process of questionnaire development involved rephrasing certain questions in order to shift the focus from personal, possibly triggering accounts of discrimination and trauma, to societal understanding and common themes. This was due to the questionnaire being conducted online, limiting the support the researcher could offer. Furthermore, with the demographic consisting of young people, minimising potential harm was paramount. The final questionnaire contained a total of sixteen questions in order to hold the young target demographic's attention: eight multiple choice and two linear-scale questions to gather quantitative data, and six open-ended questions to elicit qualitative responses. The design enabled both statistical analysis and exploration of individual perspectives.

Distribution: The questionnaire was distributed digitally via multiple platforms to ensure a broad and diverse respondent base. It was shared to personal networks via Instagram, professional connections on LinkedIn, and relevant community groups on Facebook, including those focused on education and disability advocacy. This multi-platform distribution strategy aimed to maximise reach across varied demographic and educational platforms as the purpose was to represent shared beliefs relating to twice-exceptional students in the Australian education system. This larger data set generated common trends and experiences, helping to support a representative analysis of systematic factors.

Ethical considerations: All participants were informed of the research purpose through a preamble stating that the information was being collected for a school assessment and would remain anonymous. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all questions were optional to respect participant boundaries and autonomy. No identifiable information was collected, maintaining full participant anonymity.

Data analysis: The quantitative data was analysed through comparative data visualisation and basic statistical manipulation, including cross-cultural comparisons, for example gender and type of educational institution. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic coding, identifying recurrent terminology, attitudes and key issues raised by participants.

Limitations: The total number of respondents was 60, limiting the generalisability of the data. Furthermore, as distribution relied on personal networks, there may be an element of selection bias, particularly toward individuals with existing interest in education or disability.

3.3 Focus group interviews

Research Design: Two focus group interviews were conducted of twice-exceptional young people to collect in-depth qualitative data about their schooling experiences. One focus group was composed of students from a School for Special Purposes (SSP), while the other involved students currently enrolled in mainstream schooling. This design aimed to allow for comparative insight between specialised and mainstream education environments.

Participant Recruitment: Initially, the study aimed to compare experiences across two demographic groups: twice-exceptional female and gender-diverse students, and twice-exceptional cisgender male students. However, due to difficulty locating participants who identified as both cis male and twice-

exceptional, this demographic comparison was not possible. Participants were instead grouped based on their school context (SSP or mainstream) and was an important metric as the Royal Disability Commission had recently recommended the closure of all specialised schools. Recruitment was conducted through my academic supervisor, who contacted the parents of all the SSP students under the age of eighteen via phone call to introduce the research and confirm consent to participate. Furthermore, the identification of mainstream participants and confirmation of consent was organised by my academic supervisor with the principal of the student's school.

Ethical Considerations: All participants were informed of the research purpose prior to participation through a preamble stating that the information was being collected for a school assessment and would remain anonymous. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional parental consent for those under 18. No identifiable data was collected and pseudonyms used, maintaining full participant anonymity. The focus groups were audio-recorded with consent. It is important to note all SSP participants enrolled at a setting for mental health support had experienced prior traumatic experiences in mainstream education settings, which was considered during the design and facilitation of the interview process.

Data analysis: Focus group transcripts were analysed using thematic coding and discourse analysis. This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns in language and the discursive construction of ideas around support, exclusion and belonging in education. Key issues raised by participants were categorised and interpreted in the context of existing sociocultural theory.

Limitations: The sample size consisted of six students from specialised settings and three students from mainstream schools, recruited using convenience purposive sampling. Group dynamics also influenced participation levels, with some individuals dominating discussion more than others.

3.4 Expert interviews

Research Design: Two expert interviews were conducted to gather specialist perspectives in their respective fields, medical, political and academic. The interview with a Greens member of NSW parliament, Abigail Boyd, was conducted online, while the interview with Professor Terry Cumming, an academic from University of New South Wales (UNSW) was in person.

Participant Recruitment: All possible experts were contacted via email to introduce the research and confirm interest in participation.

Ethical considerations: All participants were informed of the research purpose prior to participation through a preamble stating that the information was being collected for a school assessment and would remain anonymous. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

Data analysis: Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic coding. Perspectives from expert interviewees were grouped into aligned thematic categories alongside data from other qualitative sources, facilitating triangulation and enhancing the validity of emerging findings.

Limitations: As a member of a political party, Abigail Boyd may present a perspective influenced by party ideology or political positioning. Similarly, Professor Cumming, as an academic employed by the

UNSW, may hold institutional or disciplinary bias. These affiliations may have shaped the viewpoints expressed in their interviews and were considered when interpreting their contributions.

3.5 Methodology Conclusion

The triangulated mixed methods approach employed in this study allowed for a multifaceted exploration of the systematic exclusion of twice-exceptional students in Australia's education system. While the study's small sample sizes, purposive recruitment and reliance on personal networks limit the generalisability of findings, these limitations are balanced by the depth and authenticity of the qualitative data collected. The mixed-methods approach, triangulation across the questionnaire, focus groups and expert interviews, and careful ethical considerations strengthen the study's validity. Importantly, the youth-led, lived-experience perspective provides unique insight not commonly found in existing research, offering both credibility and originality despite the methodological constraints.

Results and discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a mixed-methods study investigating the experiences of twice-exceptional students within the Australian education system, and situates these results in relation to existing research to identify points of convergence and divergence. Data was collected through an online questionnaire (n = 60) open to the public, capturing a broad spectrum of societal understanding and perspectives; two comparative focus groups with twice-exceptional students in specialised and mainstream settings; and two expert interviews. The first expert, Professor Terry Cumming, Professor of Special Education at the UNSW, provided insights into the specialised versus mainstream schooling debate, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and an academic lens to the Disability Royal Commission. The second expert, Abigail Boyd, Greens Member of the NSW Parliament, discussed the politicised nature of education and disability policy, as well as her advocacy work. Thematic inductive coding was applied to all qualitative data, while quantitative questionnaire responses were used to contextualise and triangulate findings. Key themes identified include systemic barriers in mainstream schooling, discrimination and policy gaps, inaccessible provisions and support, mental health impacts, and visions for an inclusive future.

4.2 Systemic Barriers in Mainstream Schooling

As outlined in the literature review, twice-exceptional students in Australia encounter persistent structural and cultural barriers within the mainstream education system that inhibit both academic achievement and wellbeing outcomes. Specialised schooling is uncommon in Australia, as evidenced by 91.5% of questionnaire participants having attended mainstream schools. This is especially notable considering the survey was circulated largely through Facebook groups for autistic and twice-exceptional individuals, suggesting that the vast majority of twice-exceptional and autistic students attend

mainstream school. Focus group participants consistently reported difficulties stemming from rigid curricula, inflexible uniform policies, and limited access to reasonable adjustments in mainstream environments. These accounts were reinforced by questionnaire data indicating that over 39% of respondents perceived themselves to be at serious risk of not graduating high school, frequently citing the same barriers raised in focus groups. Focus group participants frequently reported being penalised for questioning rules they perceived as illogical and arbitrary — behaviours that often reflect critical thinking rather than defiance. These accounts suggest that the experiences of twice-exceptional students in mainstream school are comparatively substandard relative to those of their neurotypical and able-bodied peers. Such findings underscore a systematic misalignment between neurodiverse learning profiles and the disciplinary and pedagogical norms of mainstream education.

Expert insights aligned with these lived experiences. Professor Terry Cumming, the Academic Lead in Education at the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute, characterised the current secondary school system as fundamentally ill-suited to twice-exceptional students due to its profit-driven orientation and lack of emphasis on positive behaviour support. This critique echoes participant descriptions of structural inflexibility and a compliance-focused culture which disproportionately disadvantages students whose needs fall outside the standardised educational model.

Overall, these findings indicate that the barriers experienced by twice-exceptional students are not isolated incidents but are embedded within the operational and cultural frameworks of mainstream schooling. The convergence of quantitative evidence, qualitative insights, and expert perspectives underscores that systemic reform, rather than individual accommodations, is required to achieve equitable educational outcomes.

4.3 Discrimination and Policy Gaps

Neoliberalism and the politicisation of education have created a system which actively limits opportunities for children with disabilities. MP Abigail Boyd explained that the NSW Department of Education exercises minimal oversight over private schools, with “no data on rejection of students or why they leave a school,” effectively allowing non-government schools the freedom to discriminate against students “with unwanted qualities.” Boyd argued that the politicisation of inclusive education has ceased progression, as politicians often resist reforms due to financial concerns and a fear of public backlash against ‘woke’ policies. She believes a significant number of children are enrolled in specialised schools unnecessarily, advocating for structural reform consistent with Recommendation 7.14 of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

However, some research participants strongly disagreed with this view. Focus group participants in specialised settings described these schools as safe spaces, free from the bullying and torment often experienced in mainstream environments. Even if structural reforms were implemented, many participants believed that social stigma and peer discrimination would remain a barrier to inclusion. This view was reinforced by responses to the question, “What are some stereotypes you've heard of people with autism?” Negative descriptors such as ‘weird’ (mentioned nine times) and ‘dumb’ (mentioned twelve times) predominated. The questionnaire participants spanned four decades in age, indicating that these stereotypes persist across generations.

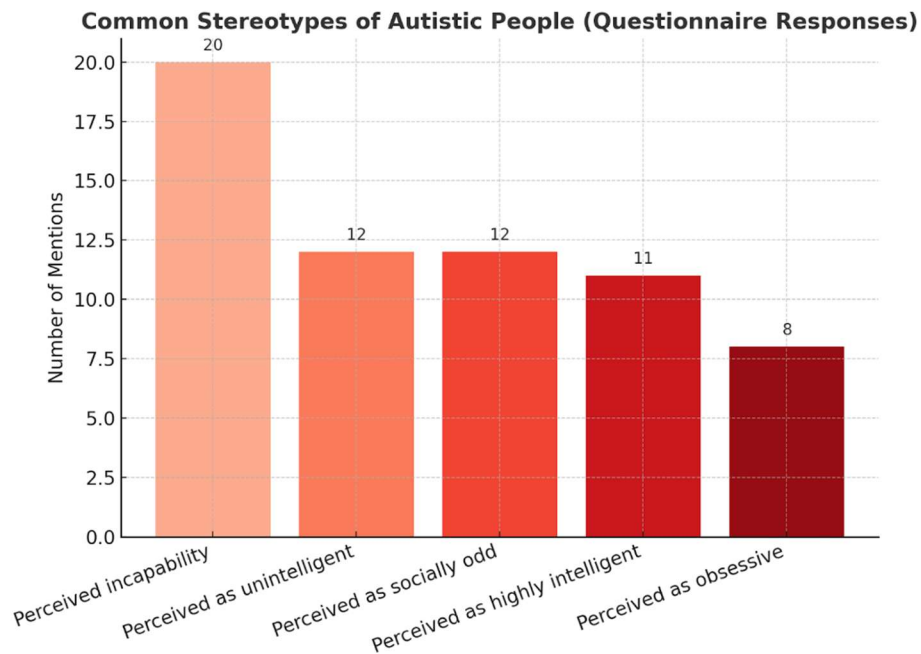


Figure 1

Interestingly, the data (see Figure 1) also revealed a paradox: similar proportions of respondents described autistic individuals as “unintelligent” and “highly intelligent.” This binary, all-or-nothing perception reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its relationship to intelligence quotient (IQ). As in the neurotypical population, autistic individuals display a wide range of intellectual abilities. Such misconceptions reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the lack of informed support.

These findings indicate that structural and social discrimination significantly disadvantage twice-exceptional students, negatively impacting their quality of life. When questionnaire participants were asked about the value of graduating high school, responses overwhelmingly reflected the belief that obtaining a Higher School Certificate provides greater life opportunities. This highlights the complexity

of the SSP debate: while some argue that specialised settings restrict inclusion, for many twice-exceptional students they provide the only viable pathway to remain in education. Within access to SSPs, students are at risk of disengagement and attrition, which prevents them from completing the HSC and accessing further study or employment. The interplay of structural policy gaps, entrenched social prejudice, and insufficient tailored educational supports perpetuates a cycle in which twice-exceptional students are marginalised, excluded and denied equitable access to education — a fundamental human right.

4.4 Inaccessible Provisions and Support

The New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) operates under the assumption that high-achieving students do not require provisions, a stance that disproportionately harms twice-exceptional students by failing to acknowledge the intersection of giftedness and disability. This was a recurring theme in focus groups, questionnaire responses and expert commentary, all of which pointed to a system that prioritises standardisation over inclusion.

Students described the extensive effort required to access even minor accommodations. One SSP student recalled:

“It took me, my mother, my occupational therapist two years to convince my old school to let me have headphones in class.”

The process of self-advocacy was described as exhausting, costly and inequitable. Obtaining provisions typically required substantial documentation and professional assessments, which many lower-socioeconomic families could not afford. Even students from more privileged backgrounds found the system opaque and adversarial. Both Expert interviewees also criticised NESA’s lack of recognition of

twice-exceptionally, emphasising that high achievement does not negate disability-related needs. By failing to accommodate students who do not conform to the traditional 'struggling learner' profile, the system compromises both their academic potential and mental health.

A recurring theme in the qualitative data was the perceived gender disparity in support. Participants assigned female at birth frequently described feeling pressured to engage in people-pleasing behaviours to avoid disciplinary or social consequences. One student recalled her mother's response to a meltdown:

"You shouldn't be acting out, you're acting like a little immature boy."

This comment illustrates the gendered stigmatisation of divergent behaviours, where expressions of distress are judged more harshly in girls. Multiple focus group participants described a lack of leeway for struggling and feelings of jealousy towards neurodivergent male peers, feeling there was a space for them. A transgender male reflected on this disparity:

"Being trans is weird because you can actively tell the difference between how people treat someone they view as female versus someone they view as male. It's crazy, I feel like people are more lenient on me now"

Over 70% of questionnaire participants believed that boys receive more learning support than girls. Disabled, gender-diverse and female students were described by research participants as experiencing systemic isolation, which has profound and enduring consequences, further compounding the challenges associated with their giftedness.

4.5 Mental Health Impacts

Focus group and questionnaire data revealed that twice-exceptional students experience heightened stress in both mainstream and specialised settings, with several participants reporting hospitalisation due to mental health deterioration. The inherently stressful nature of school environments is exacerbated by factors such as sensory overload intensified by rigid uniform policies, exhaustion from unmet needs and bullying that discourages help-seeking behaviours according to overall research findings. Only 25.4% of questionnaire participants reported feeling emotionally safe within mainstream environments (see Figure 2). Participants consistently identified the rigid structure of traditional schooling as detrimental to their wellbeing, noting that academic success often masked severe mental health challenges. One student reflected that, although they were achieving top grades, they were simultaneously managing depression and an eating disorder, with the expectation that they “deal with it quietly.” Another described being placed in a residential psychiatric program for “not applying” themselves, which the student explained was due to a temporary drop in their otherwise high grades and lack of interest in education. Others reported chronic fatigue impacting attendance and punctuality. Consequently, all focus group participants experienced some level of disrupted education. As one mainstream student articulated, “No one’s learning if they’re exhausted and stressed,” a sentiment echoed across qualitative responses. Peer-led bullying and structural exclusion also emerged as significant contributors to emotional distress, with one student asserting that “Mainstream schools don’t know how to deal with mental health,” highlighting current institutional inadequacy.

Do you feel emotionally safe at school?

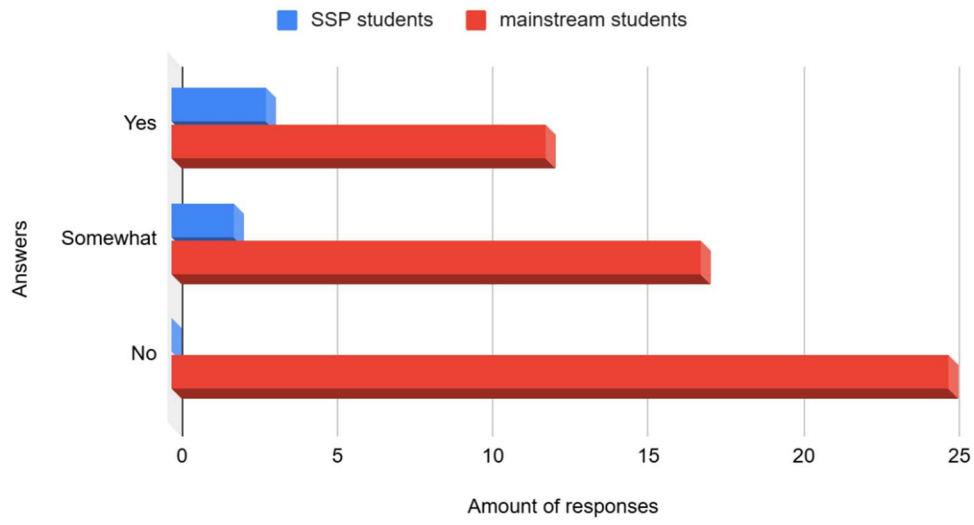


Figure 2

Using qualitative data from the questionnaire, it can be theorised that twice-exceptional students have experienced consistent mental health challenges across decades. One full-time employed adult reflected on this continuity of institutional failure, stating, “My sister would get so anxious leading up to and during tests that she would pull out her eyelashes and rub her skin to a level of harm,” and added that “no other options or support were ever offered.” This persistent pattern of exclusionary practices, emotional neglect, and systematic misunderstanding of disability underscores how deeply entrenched these issues are within the Australian education system, with long-term consequences exemplified by another adult participant’s reflection: “I never really recovered.”

4.6 Visions for an Inclusive Future

This study aimed to capture the unique experiences of twice-exceptional students in both mainstream and specialised settings, ensuring their voices inform discussions about effective schooling structures and pedagogies. Throughout the qualitative research, it became apparent that the accommodations

available to students are insufficient to address the complex nature of twice-exceptionally. Moreover, the findings highlight that accommodations, as a whole, are rendered inadequate in a fundamentally exclusionary system. Students' descriptions spoke to the idea that in the current system accessing support is often treated as a privilege rather than a right. As one specialised-schooling student expressed:

“Stop treating provisions like training wheels, start assuming they are permanent additions to a student’s education. It’s not a crutch for a broken leg, it’s a wheelchair for a lifelong disability”

Based on participant insight, an effective schooling system would cultivate a culture of collective accessibility, with support embedded by design and available to all students. Students believed this would limit the embarrassment and hesitancy twice-exceptional students feel when required to self-advocate in mainstream schools. Universality of provision was another key concept, exemplified by one mainstream student’s reflection: “The best way to support students with different learning needs is just to support everyone better.” Approaches such as Universal Design for Learning, while often recognised as disability-specific interventions, benefit all learners and promote inclusivity across the student body.

Professor Cumming explained:

“The idea of universal design was that it costs so much money to add those things [provisions] later on, it should be designed to be accessible to start with. So UDL is, instead of having to make accommodations all the time, you [teachers] set up your coursework to already be accessible to everybody. It means giving choices in how information is presented, how students interact with that information and how students are tested on the information.”

Dr Cumming, who works with schools in consultancy and research positions, emphasised the value of Universal Design for Learning. In her interview, she reported that a Sydney-based School for Specific

Purposes experienced significantly increased rates of attendance following the implementation of UDL. Furthermore, as a lecturer, she applies the same pedagogy to teach and assess the next generation of educators.

Participants highlighted clear differences in formality and rigidity between the specialised and mainstream school environments, citing these as substantial barriers to learning. Factors such as multiple assemblies per week, strict uniforms unsuitable for changes in weather, and bright lighting were reported to impede a twice-exceptional student's ability to function and complete schoolwork, even affecting attendance. Focus group participants found mainstream practices to be infantilising and disregard their individuality:

“Disregard every single rule or policy that isn’t directly supporting learning, if it exists for formality's sake, get rid of it. E.g. super strict uniform policy, not having fidget toys in class, not being able to draw while listening to the teacher speak” - Non-binary specialised school student

“We’re being trained with all these formalities which are not present at uni because the further you get the more you get treated like a person” - Male specialised school student

Furthermore, the need to diversify assessment practices in the Australian education system emerged as a major contributor to the discussion with participants ranging from a professor to students and families advocating for a system that does not reduce learning to memorisation. Only 18.6% of questionnaire participants believed that exam results accurately reflect their abilities. Coupled with declining national results, reforming senior secondary education would promote meaningful learning, support wellbeing, and mitigate potential lifelong self-esteem and mental health.

While students largely agreed on the shortcomings of mainstream education, perspectives regarding the closure of specialised schooling were more ambivalent. One male specialised school student criticised the current process to access SSPs, identifying unofficial diagnoses as a significant barrier that leaves many students without support. Another specialised school student expressed a more radical viewpoint:

“I don’t think there will ever be a place for twice-exceptional students in the mainstream. Unless there are significant changes that make mainstream schools more like ours, then they wouldn’t be mainstream because mainstream schools are built for people who are neurotypical. They’re not built for neurodiverse or twice-exceptional people. I feel like to have a mainstream school that is even bearable, one that can foster creativity and support these students is not possible without fundamentally changing society.”

The notion that societal change is required alongside structural change was reinforced by Abigail Boyd. While she supported the Royal Commission’s 7.14 Recommendation, she also highlighted the importance of ensuring safety in schools. Boyd reflected on the issues of ableism and bullying, which twice-exceptional students consistently identify as significant barriers to accessing education alongside their peers.

“I think we can minimise [ableism and bullying] and we can make it better, but I don’t think we can get rid of it. And I think there’ll always be that need for a safe place and everyone deserves a safe place. We shouldn’t be making people go into places that aren’t safe for them.”

Some students adopted more moderate positions, advocating for incremental environmental changes rather than systemic overhaul. Suggestions included increased flexibility in classroom setup, adjustments to sensory-intensive lighting, and the implementation of kinder, more empathetic

communication. The idea of separated classrooms within the same school was also proposed as a viable idea for expansion. As one gender-diverse specialised school student reflected:

“You're always going to need to separate students, even mainstream you have graded classes. Neurodiverse and neurotypical students need to be separated but it doesn't need to be as it is now. There can be different streams of classes in the same school if the system is set up right. It shouldn't be that dramatic of a separation, where being in a mainstream will be actively damaging a neurodiverse student, instead of simply not being optimal”

The tensions revealed by students' perspectives in this study underscore a need for greater flexibility within the Australian secondary education system, including the continued operation of specialised settings, both independent and embedded within mainstream high schools. Until mainstream schools can demonstrably provide equivalent levels of personalised care and support, specialised environments remain both necessary and irreplaceable. These institutions advance educational equity by ensuring students' rights to access learning environments conducive to their development, aligning with Australia's stated commitments to inclusion and diversity. While specialised schools cannot accommodate all neurodiverse students in Australia, they should provide safe environments for those most vulnerable. This highlights the need for greater adoption of Universal Design for Learning within mainstream schools. Such change requires public policy reform and backing from a major political party; however, disability policy has historically not been prioritised during elections. Abigail Boyd, however, contends that Australia is on the cusp of education reform due to a generational shift in political will. She emphasised that young people are driving advocacy for systemic change, and as the neoliberal, unequal education system continues to fail more individuals entering the voting age, the government will be compelled to act. Professor Cumming echoed this perspective, noting that:

“Use your voice, every chance you get. Write letters, emails, find out who the people are at the top.”

The outcome of this research points to a system in which support provisions are universal, not framed as special accommodations, but embedded within an empathetic and passion-based learning environment. This includes the removal of unnecessary formalities, the diversification of assessment models, and access to multiple educational pathways. Importantly, this inclusive approach is not a set of special measures for a minority; when implemented effectively, it has the potential to enhance the quality of education for all learners.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the lived experiences of twice-exceptional students navigating Australia's education system, situating their struggles within broader cultural, political, and structural contexts. The findings demonstrate that exclusion is not the result of individual shortcomings, but the consequence of an educational model that privileges conformity, standardisation, and neoliberal policy priorities over student wellbeing. Despite persistent advocacy, provisions remain inaccessible, gender and social biases endure, and mental health consequences are severe. Rather than prioritising scores over student welfare, education departments across Australia must meaningfully engage with the student voices captured in this study to create structural, systemic change rooted in universal design.

The research affirms the importance of retaining specialised settings as safe spaces for vulnerable students, while simultaneously transforming mainstream schools into inclusive environments that centre empathy, flexibility, and accessibility. Crucially, twice-exceptional students themselves articulated a vision for education as a process of discovery, creativity, and equity, rather than rote performance under exam pressure. If policymakers engage meaningfully with these voices, Australia can move toward an educational model that values diversity as strength, rather than deficiency.

Although limited in scope and sample size, this study amplifies perspectives too often marginalised in policy debates and underscores the urgent need for reform. By embedding universal design, abolishing unnecessary formalities, and diversifying pathways, the education system can shift from a culture of exclusion to one of empowerment. Meanwhile, specialised schools will continue to serve as a vital safety net in our society, ensuring students in need are given a safe, flexible environment for individualised learning. The future of twice-exceptional students and, indeed all learners, depends on such change.

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