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jespar
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk
Volume 30, Number 2, April–June 2025

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/hjsp20

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To cite this article: Stuart Woodcock, Elizabeth Hitches, Marina Di Sipio & Brian Moore (02 Apr 2025): "I Just Needed Someone to Hear Me": Listening to Student Voices on Secondary School Support, Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2025.2485036

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2025.2485036

Published online: 02 Apr 2025.

JOURNAL OF EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS PLACED AT RISK (JESPAR)
https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2025.2485036

"I Just Needed Someone to Hear Me": Listening to Student Voices on Secondary School Support

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ABSTRACT

Although inclusion remains a key goal of education globally, there are still many challenges that exist to supporting students with accessibility requirements and/or disability within secondary school who are already at higher risk of not graduating. Research has often focused on the voices of professionals, such as school leaders and teachers, and neglected listening to students. This study sought to qualitatively explore and understand the students' ($n=76$) perspective regarding whether the support they received in secondary school accommodated their particular needs and provided space for students to give voice to the ways in which this support could be strengthened or improved. Students highlighted the significant benefits of not only tangible accommodations, but also the informal social and emotional supports that were founded on genuine care and connection. School counseling was one of the most widely referenced supports, and although some students reported beneficial experiences, a large number expressed numerous concerns. Academically, there were reports of both effective formal and informal accommodations with a key outcome of improved results and decreased stress. However, students expressed concerns about the accessibility and consistency of accommodations. Implications are discussed with the consideration of the students' recommendations identified in this study.

Introduction

Since the "Education for All" paradigm and the Salamanca Statement in the 1990s, inclusive education remains a highly regarded global movement (Anderson & Boyle, 2015) which has been implemented across educational settings internationally (see Subban et al., 2022). Inclusive education is believed to benefit all students' academic, social, and emotional learning, and achievement (Antoninis et al., 2020). The majority of investigations have focused on the practices occurring within the primary school context (Van Mieghem et al., 2020); however, secondary schools can experience additional challenges creating inclusive environments with students attending various subject-specific classes with different teachers throughout the school day (De Vroey

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et al., 2016). Furthermore, aside from studies exploring students' self-concept (De Vroey et al., 2016), the perceptions of secondary school students with accessibility requirements and/or disability[1] (ARD) are considered relatively hidden; "rarely is any attention paid to what they have to say about their education" (Schwab et al., 2018, p. 33). This is despite arguments which suggest student agency, preparedness, and consultation regarding their accommodations in the classroom can significantly impact the effectiveness of their implementation, and thus, how well students' diverse strengths and needs are catered for (Lovett & Leja, 2013; Shogren et al., 2012). This study adds to the literature by listening to the voices of students with ARD on the efficacy of the support they received in Australian secondary schools and importantly, highlights students' beliefs regarding how this support can be strengthened or improved.

Inclusion in secondary school

Inclusive education is multidimensional (Schwab et al., 2018). It aims to foster acceptance and is responsive to students' diverse characteristics and abilities through a strengths-based and equitable approach to learning and teaching practices (Duncan et al., 2021; Spratt & Florian, 2015). Student diversity is valued and celebrated (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), and students feel a sense of belonging in their educational setting (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Through this approach students are enabled to meaningfully and actively learn (Ainscow, 2020) as well as equitably demonstrate their understanding (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). When inclusive practices are implemented successfully, students' learning and wellbeing benefit (Antoninis et al., 2020).

There is a wealth of research that highlights the challenges around enacting inclusion in the secondary school context. For example, secondary schools have been recognized as innately subject-centered rather than environments typically conducive of a more student-centered approach (Pearce et al., 2010). Secondary school teachers also have the additional challenge of understanding the individual strengths and needs of several students across multiple classes and subject areas (De Vroey et al., 2016). Additionally, the understanding of what constitutes inclusion can also vary across contexts, both internationally and within Australia (Boyle & Anderson, 2020; Dally et al., 2019), impacting its enactment, as can teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy to effectively implement an inclusive approach for all students (Duncan et al., 2021; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019). Even when students are engaged in an "inclusive" setting, students with ARD can still experience micro-exclusion, instances of segregation or exclusion which undermine their sense of belonging (e.g., seating arrangements which unintentionally negatively emphasizes difference) (Woodcock et al., 2022). There are also

[1]Students with accessibility requirements and/or disability (ARD) are considered to be those experiencing either impairment, disability, illness (whether chronic, episodic, or temporary), learning difficulties (whether general or specific), or challenging personal circumstances, such as being a carer (Hitches et al., 2025). The term ARD intentionally broadens beyond the term "disability," noting that not all students with accessibility requirements will experience disability or identify as having a disability (Osborne, 2019; Scholten et al., 2025). The term ARD is positioned within a social-relational lens (see Thomas, 2010) on students' diverse needs, taking a view that students' educational experiences are impacted by barriers present in the environment, and the interplay between students' ARD and their educational context. Language in this space continues to evolve and the researchers' current use of "ARD" is intended to be inclusive of all students who may require academic accommodation or wellbeing support in high school, whether or not students have a disability.

concerns around the lack of resourcing and funding to sufficiently cater to students' needs (Duncan et al., 2020, 2021; Pearce et al., 2010; Round et al., 2016). In Australia, the level of resourcing a student with ARD will receive to support their access to the national curriculum is dependent on the state or territory in which they reside (Anderson & Boyle, 2015), presenting a disparity in funding for students across the states and territories due to the differing methods and definitions utilized throughout the country (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012; Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). Overall, inclusion is regarded as the pinnacle of teacher practice (Ainscow, 2020), however, there are several challenges that impact its ability to be put into practice effectively, such as lack of sufficient time for staff, of resources, and support to plan and teach inclusively (Sze et al., 2024).

A diverse student cohort

Globally, there is a body of research that highlights the diverse student population present in schools. For example, multiple international studies have explored how student ethnicity (Rjosk et al., 2017; Rucinski, 2022), linguistic diversity (Dotzel et al., 2021), socio-economic status (Bellibas, 2016), and disability (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018) impact student experience and academic outcomes in secondary school. These studies discuss only a portion of diversity that exists amongst secondary school aged students across the world, however, it showcases the breadth of inclusive practices that are required in secondary schooling for all students to receive an equitable education.

Within the context of this study, in Australia it has been identified that 1 in 10 school-aged children have a disability and it is predicted that 32% of these students will either not be given enough support or any at all (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). There are also several other experiences which may warrant students to receive accessibility adjustments or wellbeing support. For example, students may have specific learning disabilities[2] such as dyslexia or experience more general difficulties, such as completing education while learning English as a second language (see Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). Furthermore, mental health challenges are an increasingly pertinent factor impacting students' everyday life, with 1 in 5 secondary school aged students experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress during the school year prior to the pandemic (Lawrence et al., 2015), and students' wellbeing and ability to manage stressors declining since (Headspace, 2021). These statistics show only a small proportion of the diversity of secondary school cohorts. The challenge for school systems and teachers is to be enablers for these students, rather than obstacles (Jackson, 2013). Inclusive education seeks to reduce the barriers to education which students might face (Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019).

Impacts and challenges that are faced by students with ARD

Given the aforementioned challenges and inconsistencies in inclusive practice and the scarcity of student voice on these experiences, recent research has highlighted the many

[2]This term varies internationally. For example, the equivalent term in the UK is specific learning difficulties. See Hardy and Woodcock (2014).

challenges faced by students with ARD in secondary schools globally (Subban et al., 2022). There can be difficulties performing academically in class and participating to their full potential (Capurso & Dennis, 2017). For example, in comparison to their peers, those diagnosed with a mental health condition are at a three times higher risk of not graduating from secondary school (Mitchell et al., 2022), whilst those who experience injury have almost twice the risk (Mitchell et al., 2021a). Furthermore, Australian based studies investigating the academic repercussions for students hospitalized due to mental health conditions (Mitchell et al., 2022), asthma (Mitchell et al., 2021b), or epilepsy (Lystad et al., 2022) identified an increased risk of achieving below the national minimum average in numeracy and reading, and a higher likelihood of not completing secondary school. Hinton and Kirk (2015) also considered the ongoing support required for students who experience significant barriers during their education, such as students undergoing periods of hospitalization. It suggested that teachers often lack the knowledge to comprehend the repercussions of students' medical needs, such as side effects of medications and managing absence from the classroom. Indeed, students with ARD may face unique challenges attending school, have higher rates of absenteeism, and the barriers to overcome this are complex (Gee, 2018). Such absences have various impacts, including on students' cognitive, behavioral, and socioemotional skills, as well as skills preparing them for post-secondary study (Locquiao et al., 2021). Overall, the evidence suggests that students with ARD are identified as having a higher risk for emotional, social, and behavioral issues at school compared to their peers (Jackson, 2013). These key challenges include learning gaps, disrupted friendships, attendance concerns, and increased stress and anxiety (Capurso & Dennis, 2017). Overall, students with ARD may experience lower academic results, lower rates of employment beyond graduation, and for some students, higher rates of exclusion and suspensions throughout their schooling (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; NSW Department of Education, 2024).

Students can also experience school related stress or difficult circumstances impacting their mental health. Results from the Program for International Student Assessment from over 38 countries highlighted the correlation between school related anxiety and its negative impact on overall well-being, including academic achievement and life satisfaction (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). Furthermore, 42% of secondary school aged students reported that stress was a barrier to sleep (Noland et al., 2009) which is an alarming statistic given that inadequate sleep during adolescence has been acknowledged as a serious health risk for young people across the globe (Owens et al., 2014). Additionally, Pascoe et al. (2020) highlights the several physical and mental impacts that school related stress causes for adolescents, including for motivation and academic achievement. As such, students may require support for their wellbeing.

Support available within the classroom

Inside the classroom there are a range of resources available for students with ARD including scaffolded support, additional feedback, and assessment practices that consider the students' strengths and needs (Dally et al., 2019). In Australia, legislation requires all schools to make reasonable adjustments to ensure all students can access and

actively engage in their education (e.g., Department of Education, 2024). Adjustments are accommodations or modifications that students receive in order to access the curriculum and assessments (Davies et al., 2016; Lovett & Leja, 2013). Some of the most common accommodations that are utilized for students with ARD are frequent breaks (Witmer et al., 2018), extended time (Parsons et al., 2020; Witmer et al., 2018), individualized instructional support, seating arrangement, and the use of information and communications technology (Parsons et al., 2020). There are numerous challenges for teachers and students when utilizing adjustments in the classroom. Although it is a fundamental requirement of the profession, general classroom teachers have expressed concerns around creating accommodations (Killoran et al., 2013). These difficulties are primarily founded on concerns regarding a lack of training (Siam & Al-Natour, 2016), time constraints, having a large number of students in the classroom, and a lack of physical resources (Rasooli et al., 2021).

Research emphasizes the importance of placing central focus on the student in the process of creating accommodations. In fact, it has been suggested that student agency, preparedness, and consultation can significantly impact the effectiveness of their implementation (Lovett & Leja, 2013; Shogren et al., 2012). Witmer et al. (2018) highlighted that teachers report a lack of student awareness of their own adjustments as the primary reason for its ineffective application in the classroom. From the student perspective, this is supported by Baker and Scanlon (2016) who found that students often feel unprepared and uninformed to take advantage of their adjustments. Students have also been deterred from using accommodations during class due to feeling embarrassment (Witmer et al., 2018), and some academic accommodations are not always delivered discreetly (Bolt et al., 2011). These experiences can have impacts beyond students' secondary school studies; for example, Bolt et al. (2011) reported that students who neglect to use their accommodations in secondary school are more likely to lack agency in later contexts, such as university. Hence, it is evident that student voice and understanding is paramount to the effectiveness of accommodation implementation within the classroom.

Research on when students can effectively use their prescribed adjustments has primarily focused on assessment accommodations, rather than everyday instructional accommodations (Thurlow, 2014). For example, Rasooli et al. (2021) highlights that those students who received accommodations for assessment experienced a significant improvement in the accessibility of the assessment task and curriculum. This focus upon assessment support rather than instructional support could be explained through Gallagher and Spina's (2021) research that highlighted that the mechanisms of funding allocation has generated performative pressures for teachers, and shifted focus from student needs to collecting accounts of practice which are easier to collect in assessment form.

In the classroom, depending on each student's funding there is also the possibility that students with ARD may receive additional specialist resources. Within the secondary school classroom both general and specialist educators must have knowledge, commitment, and strategies to teach students with ARD (Dally et al., 2019). However, students with ARD may also have access to additional staff, such as learning support teachers, teacher aides and assistance, but teachers show concern around the lack of availability of these resources (Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019). Specialist staff are required

to provide a specific skillset for effective instructional and behavioral accommodations to support students socially and academically (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Support available outside the classroom

For students with ARD there are supports available externally from the classroom to support students, such as school counselors, nurses, and psychologists (Jackson, 2013). Unfortunately, research highlights that adolescents have low rates of help seeking from professional sources as they may prefer to seek support from their peers or within their social networks (Lawrence et al., 2015). Among the available resources, school-based counseling is an avenue that can be used by students with ARD as they are able to offer a range of services for social, emotional, and academic support (Green et al., 2013). Although secondary school aged students have concerns around stigma and confidentiality accessing counseling (O'Connor & Coyne, 2017), adolescents have been reported twice as likely to access school-based counseling than children (Lawrence et al., 2015). Interestingly, the availability of school-based counseling varies globally with significant disparities of counselor-student ratios, from 1 counselor per 245 students in Finland to only 1 school counselor per 1,800 students in one Australian state (Harris, 2013).

It may also be necessary for students with ARD to receive additional support to complete national or state-wide assessments. However, there is an increasing number of students who are not participating in national testing, and students with ARD are primarily represented in this excluded group (Anderson & Boyle, 2015). In Australia, some states (such as New South Wales) have instated a review into the disability provisions provided throughout the Higher School Certificate (HSC; NSW Government, 2024), with a key focus of these reviews consisting of evaluating the efficacy of the current processes and systems in place for students to gain access to appropriate provisions. Teather and Hillman (2017, p. 551) identified concerns around the "invisible" cohort of students whose data remained unconsidered for national review and development of systems and policies. For those students with ARD who have not been exposed to gatekeeping and exclusion from national testing, there are concerns around the accessibility of these assessments. Davies et al. (2016) uncovered that the percentage of accommodations provided within the classroom was 21% higher than when the same students attended external national testing. This may result in students with ARD not being able to participate fairly and may likely result in inaccurate data which ultimately impacts policy and practice.

There is a multitude of research on inclusive education globally and the importance it has for supporting students with ARD, however these studies primarily focus on the perspectives of teachers, principals, or policy makers, and lack the voices and perceptions of students (Subban et al., 2022). Ultimately, it is this research that plays a vital role in policy creation and transmission of knowledge across the world (Graham et al., 2023). As such, this study adds to the minimal research that examines students' perspectives. This paper aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of students with ARD about their experiences of support in secondary school and create recommendations to strengthen student-centered support. With research highlighting the difficulties students with ARD may face throughout their educational journey (Anderson & Boyle, 2015), it is important their voices be heard and valued.

Methods

This study sought to explore students' beliefs regarding the extent to which the support they received in secondary school accommodated their particular needs, and the ways in which this support could be strengthened or improved. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What do students with ARD perceive were the strengths of the support they received in secondary school?
2. What do students with ARD perceive were the weaknesses of the support they received in secondary school?
3. What do students with ARD believe are the ways the support they received in secondary school could have been strengthened or improved?

Participants

Participants ($n = 76$) were undergraduate university students in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, who experienced ARD during secondary school and reported seeking support. The majority of students were female ($n = 60$), 16 were male, and no student identified as of another gender; a gender ratio reflective of the academic field of study from which students were drawn. There were 26 students aged under 20 years, 46 students aged between 20 and 29 years, 3 students aged 30 to 39 years, and 1 student aged 40 to 49 years. Students self-reported experiencing one or more disability or impairment ($n = 11$), chronic illness ($n = 12$) or illness ($n = 35$), learning difficulty ($n = 16$), and/or difficult circumstances ($n = 53$) for which they sought support in secondary school. Students' often reported combinations of these. For example, Lainey[3] "lived in a really toxic household environment and suffered extreme emotional distress," Zoe "had a persistent migraine for over 9 months that caused all sorts of issues…learning disability…[and] several sports related injuries resulting in ongoing nerve damage," and Kelly "had hearing issues and multiple operations on [their] ears preventing [them] from hearing and learning at school, plus attending while [they were] in hospital. [Their] parents also divorced and subsequently [they] moved inter-state with multiple school movements. This made [them] dislike school and affected [their] educational outcomes." Where students provided details of difficult circumstances, these also included "homelessness" (Luna), "sexual harassment" (Penelope), and for Quinn, their "parents died during [Quinn's] high school years, and it caused a lot of issues and problems in the environment." We provide these examples here in students' own words to illustrate the complexity of their experiences during secondary school and the significance of receiving effective accessibility and wellbeing support.

[3]Names are pseudonyms.

Procedure

This study forms part of a larger research project exploring students' experiences with support services in secondary school and university. Ethical approval was sought from the relevant human research ethics committee, and once approved, course conveners (i.e., unit/program coordinators) of core units (i.e., subjects/classes) in one academic field of study were approached, and permission sought for their students to be invited to participate. The researchers were not engaged in teaching these units. Students were invited to voluntarily complete a questionnaire anonymously in their own time and return either a blank or completed questionnaire to a locked post-box in the classroom the following week. This approach was intended to provide a means of engaging in research for those students who may already be experiencing challenges with additional demands on their energy and time (see Dryer et al., 2016), and enable anonymous reporting of experiences, particularly for students who are uncomfortable disclosing to their educational institutions (see Osborne, 2019). As students were recounting their experiences outside of class time, students were provided with the contact details of not only the researchers and university support services, but also a 24-hour free crisis support line in Australia (Lifeline, 2020) should they experience discomfort.

Instrument

To collect both demographic and perceptual data, a questionnaire was developed containing closed and open-text response questions. Questions were aligned with the research objectives and phrased in ways to avoid leading students' responses (see Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Students were asked their age, gender, and form of ARD, as well as whether they had sought support during secondary school. For students experiencing ARD and indicating seeking support in secondary school, they were then asked:

1. Please explain how effective the support was in accommodating your needs.
2. What were the positives of the support for you?
3. What were the negatives of the support for you?
4. Do you feel that there was any support that was not offered, that would have been beneficial?
5. Were there any areas of the support that could be improved upon?

Analysis

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was selected as an appropriate means of identifying patterns across students' responses, with consideration of suggestions by Braun and Clarke (2021). Following familiarization with the data, the researchers took an inductive approach to coding, identifying units of meaning or codes that were low inference (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were then developed and refined so that codes and themes closely aligned with students' raw data (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). For example, the codes "*reduction in stress*" and "*stronger academic achievement*"

which spoke to experiences students perceived had resulted from academic accommodations, led to the broader theme of "*Outcomes of beneficial academic support*." Trustworthiness was supported through researcher reflexivity, such as of their background in secondary school and higher education contexts, and through detailed and transparent reporting of the aims, procedure, and findings (see Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Findings

Three key themes were identified across students' responses: Academic support, social and emotional support, and experiences common across support types. Students identified a range of beneficial supports, and where these were lacking, expressed the shortcomings of this and suggested ways in which support could be strengthened or improved. The themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes of support.

Theme	Subthemes
Academic support	
Beneficial academic support actions	School-based assessment accommodations
	Statewide and national assessment accommodations
	Non-assessment-based strategies
Beneficial academic support outcomes	Reduction in stress
	Positive learning journey
	Stronger academic achievement
Shortcomings of academic support	Academic accommodations not provided
	Lack of exam support
	Limited access to learning when absent
	Challenges accessing support
Social and emotional support	
Beneficial social and emotional support actions	Positive relationships and perceptions of care
	Social, emotional, and skillset guidance
	Counseling
Beneficial social and emotional support outcomes	Reduction in stress and anxiety
Shortcomings of social and emotional support	Not feeling cared for
	Poor counseling experiences
	Needing improved confidentiality and privacy of seeking help
	Needing increased awareness among teachers and peers
Experiences common across support types	
Beneficial academic, social and emotional support actions	School-led referral for both academic and social and emotional support
Shortcomings of academic, social and emotional support	A need for greater communication within schools
	A need for greater communication between external and internal supports
	Supporting student agency
	Improving awareness of the academic and social and emotional support available
	Challenges with inconsistent academic, social and emotional support

Beneficial academic support actions

School-based assessment accommodations

Many students acknowledged adjustments that occurred for school-led examinations or assessment tasks. These included utilizing extra time and having accommodations to complete assessments.

> I had extended time for assessments (Lucy)

> I was able to bypass simple requirements that I was unable to e.g., spelling and writing. I was also able to take my examinations effectively (Chelsea)

Statewide and national assessment accommodations

In addition to the accommodations received during school-based assessments, a variety of students identified that their school was able to provide and support the application for accommodations (referred to as special provisions) for statewide or national assessments. As these participants were based in NSW, the Higher School Certificate (HSC) was widely referenced.

> they offered me a private room in my HSC[4] to complete exams…able to focus during exams and not stress about fainting in a room full of people (Maya)

> my school assisted me in applying for special provisions and misadventure support. It was effective in taking some of the stress off my shoulders (Georgia)

Non-assessment-based strategies

For some students, accommodations were required beyond assessment tasks, which included the use of breaks during class time, after school tutoring, and paraprofessionals such as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher.

> timeouts from class…when needed. Useful due to anxiety (Gracie)

> free afterschool tutoring, extra outside school days to complete content (Allison)

> my school sent an ESL teacher to take care and support all ESL students, which helped a lot in our learning experience (Amida)

Beneficial academic support outcomes

Reduction in stress

A key outcome of beneficial academic support during students' senior years of secondary school was a reduction in students' stress toward their academic results. This occurred mainly as a result of misadventure support, support services, and special provisions.

> my school assisted me in … misadventure support[5]. It was effective in taking some of the stress off my shoulders (Georgia)

> I only found out late about support services. I was able to receive a medical certificate for the HSC exams of which I experienced panic attacks (muscle spasms and loss of vision) … They took the stress off worrying that panic attacks would severely detriment my ATAR[6] [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank] (Evelyn)

> [special provisions] reduced stress for performance and recovery (Tierney)

[4]The HSC is the most senior exam taken by students in secondary school in NSW, Australia. This State-wide exam provides marks from which to apply for post-secondary study or enter employment.

[5]Support which accounts for students' circumstances when a scheduled exam cannot be completed and ensures academic outcomes are not impacted.

[6]A ranking based on students' overall HSC result.

Positive learning journey

Multiple students reported that the additional supports positively impacted retention and their learning journey, such as developing their confidence and performance at school.

> kept me in school (Quinn)

> helped a lot in our learning experience…It helped me to study and build my confidence in English (Amida)

> without it I would not have done as well as I did (Robert)

Stronger academic achievement

For many students the accommodations and considerations they received from their secondary school improved their results and success at completing their studies.

> [I] managed to pass and complete schooling (Kathy)

> I was able to complete my HSC and go on [to] complete my first degree (Zoe)

> I started passing exams and classes (Chelsea)

Shortcomings of academic support

Academic accommodations not provided

Students mentioned multiple examples of accommodations that they would have liked to have received to better accommodate their needs, which were not provided.

> having [been] allowed to type responses (Emily)

> extra time to do things like classwork, exams and assignments as I can't process info[rmation] as fast (Chelsea)

> allowed to stand up plus stretch during exams to relieve the pain (Maeve)

Lack of exam support

The challenges students faced during exams depended on the support that was offered, and students noted accommodations that were lacking or did not equitably support their needs.

> allowed me to get out of class when I experienced pain, but didn't really help me for exams (Maeve)

> support for RSI [repetitive strain injury] was having a scribe. This [a scribe] was not effective as it impairs exam performance therefore I waivered my right to one and dealt with the pain instead (Emily)

Limited access to learning when absent

There were several students who experienced missing classes and mentioned the need to improve supports when absent from school. The necessity of this was best described by several participants as having to independently catch up with missing work that they were not aware of and receiving minimal support when returning back to school.

> [no] support from teachers of what work was going on in the classroom and homework (Sharma)

> actually knowing what I missed in class and help catching up – you can't just "borrow a book from someone" if you don't know if you will be back at school that week!!! …You shouldn't be sick, struggling with things, and then have all of that – even finding out what you missed – all dumped on your shoulders. it is too much for a young person to manage … I guess it was like academic life and death – do what you have to do to keep going, even if no one puts out a hand to rescue you (Bailey)

> the support provided was minimal and the responsibility was placed entirely on me to keep up with my cohort…I was essentially given work without the help needed (Molly)

Challenges accessing support

Often students mentioned that the process of seeking academic supports were difficult, time consuming, or delayed. For one student, teachers' attitudes toward support also created a barrier.

> time consuming (Mila)

> too late – could have been identified earlier (Kathy)

> it was a very formal process to apply for special provisions. A lot of documentation was required, which at times heightened my stress during an already difficult period (Georgia)

> teachers scorned me…reluctant to offer [support] to me (Oscar)

Beneficial social and emotional support actions

Positive relationships and perceptions of care

A significant number of students acknowledged the importance of relationships when receiving support within the school environment. These relationships were primarily centered on a sense of care, connection, personalization, and consistency.

Feeling cared for and supported. Students readily described the elements and characteristics that they found positive from the person they were receiving supports from. These were all founded on the concept of feeling cared for, comfortable, and understood.

> made me feel supported, understood, and comfortable in asking for the help when I needed it (Asher)

> they did everything in their power and I really appreciated that there were people there that cared enough to support me (Lainey)

Personalized support and connection. Multiple students mentioned human connection as a positive to the support they received. One student explained that the "personal level" of support allowed them to "comfortably express [them]self" (Belinda) whilst creating an environment in which "it felt natural to seek help, not forced" (Belinda). This personalization and connection was echoed by others:

> personal honest care (Amy)
>
> human connection…teachers that I really connected with (Sahana)

Someone to talk to. A key message that several students shared was that the support they received was based on formally or informally talking with someone at the school, whether that be a teacher, counselor, or mentor.

> I was able to share how I was feeling (instead of suppressing). I knew I had a teacher to talk to if needed and school counsellor (Kyra)
>
> it was like talking with a friend who was able to talk at convenient times for me (Jemma)
>
> they allowed me to have someone to talk to if I was upset or stressed out (Ken)

Positive follow up. Students also mentioned that this support and care was better received when it was followed through with a reconnection at a later point.

> I was kept somewhat in touch with (Sharma)
>
> showed that someone cared… followed up at a later date (Maeve)

Social, emotional, and skillset guidance

Students considered the importance of teacher and mentor support to be effective or positive when it offered opportunities and guidance for reducing health stress, building motivation, and facilitating friendships.

> I was given tips for better sleeping (Willow)
>
> motivated me…teachers always assured me that with my potential and hard work, that I could make it (Roslyn)
>
> "[support building] other friendships" after "bullying/social interruptions" (Mitchell)

Counseling

Several students stated they gained positive outcomes from their experiences with counseling in school. These included a decrease in stress, support with mediation, and resolution-based discussions.

> the counsellor gave me advice on how to "destress"…it allowed me to be less stressed (Morgan)
>
> I saw the school psychologist for my testing anxiety and got more time to take tests (Blake)
>
> mediated with school counsellor (Ava)

Beneficial social and emotional support outcomes

Similarly to the benefits of effective academic accommodations, as a result of the social and emotional supports offered, students consistently mentioned the positive impact on reducing the level of stress and anxiety at school.

it helped me feel more calm and relaxed (Lucy)

lessened amount of stress, made me want to attend school (Harper)

decreased my anxiety during class (Maeve)

Shortcomings of social and emotional support

Not all students experienced positive social and emotional support. A number of students expressed the difficulties when such support was lacking and suggested ways it could be improved.

Not feeling cared for

There were multiple participants who described negative experiences with staff at their school when seeking additional supports. Students described feeling ignored, degraded, and judged. Note that not all students mentioned the specific role of the staff member who created this experience for them.

I just needed someone to hear me but a lot of the time I felt ignored and medicated (Louise)

no empathy (Mila)

head of the school…Quite degrading and judgmental. Inconsiderate of my anxiety (Penelope)

Poor counseling experiences

Throughout students' reports, the most frequently discussed negative experiences were based on seeking assistance from the school counselor. The key areas of concern were based on a lack of confidentially, the perceived skillset of the counselor, and undermining student agency.

Discomfort, lack of confidentiality, and judgment. A key theme when students described negative experiences with their school counselor included describing their experience of counseling as fraught with judgment, discomfort, or lacking confidentiality.

the old counsellor laughed and betrayed my confidentiality, dismissed my feelings, gave lectures, and unreliable and far away and unrealistic advice (Ellie)

once I had worked up to seek help, I was totally ignored and told "other people's problems are more important than yours." (Lauren)

the only other offer [of support] was a counsellor but she told me I "had the problems of a 40 year old woman" and she didn't know how I was coping, so I just felt worse — so why bother (Bailey)

Raise the quality of counselor support. There were five students who made a particular mention to wanting "better" (Katrina), "proper" (Lilly) and "professional" (Sahana) counselors. For example,

maybe by starting to have competent and empathetic school counsellors (Quinn)

[a need for a] school counsellor for emotional distress (Emily)

> [wanting] professional support [rather than teacher] (Sahana)

Availability. There were four students who commented on wanting more counseling sessions to be available.

> more availability of staff and counsellors. Too many kids, not enough staff (Louise)

> more variety. We only had one counsellor. If they didn't work for you, you were stuck (Steph)

Needing improved confidentiality and privacy of seeking help

A recommendation made by students included considering more subtle and private methods of engaging with additional supports, such as counselors.

> more sensitive and privacy or its effect socially (Angelique)

> develop more subtle ways for students to seek help. E.g. written methods. I did feel embarrassed and apprehensive to talk and boldly ask for help (Asher)

> [greater] confidentiality (Flynn)

Needing increased awareness among teachers and peers

There was mention of including education for schools and students about mental illness.

> wider teacher awareness (Amy)

> support in educating peers on mental illness (Olivia)

Beneficial academic, social, and emotional support actions

School-led referral for both academic and social and emotional support

In some instances, students identified that the school was a key determinant for referral to supports outside the school community.

> they [school] helped to refer me elsewhere (Louise)

> school didn't let my [abusive] parents pull me out of school, made sure I was seen by doctors, psychiatrists, even against my parents' wishes (Luna)

Shortcomings of academic, social, and emotional support

A need for greater communication within schools

Students suggested improving communication within schools as it impacted the effectiveness of accommodations that could be provided.

> communication between departments and learning support to make accommodations consistent (Zoe)

> the support offered was not communicated to the staff leading to problems accessing it (Angelique)

A need for greater communication between external and internal supports

Some students recommended improving their school's link to external services such as psychologists, helplines, and other out of school services.

> communicate with better sources (psychologists, helplines, etc) (Jackson)

> had to access out of school services. Made communicating with teachers difficult (Kathy)

Supporting student agency

Students highlighted the need for student agency over who they spoke to and having options for support, rather than their needs assumed by others.

> definitely talking to someone I actually felt comfortable with (likeable teacher), rather than [forced to see] the counsellor who was a stranger to me (Kennedy)

> yes, more range of help options…rather than teachers assuming what would help me (Kelly)

Improving awareness of the academic and social and emotional support available

Several students mentioned the importance of improving the awareness of academic accommodations.

> visibility. It should be made known that anyone can ask for support… Lack of knowledge of existence and what entitles me to support (Evelyn)

> I didn't know of any academic support, which would have hugely helped me (Lauren)

> it did not seem… to accommodate, but I don't know what options there were to do with this (Piper)

Challenges with inconsistent academic and social and emotional supports

Variation and inconsistency of support was mentioned within the same school environment.

> I had to seek support out myself. It took a while to get support as it depended on who you talked to (Sharma)

> wasn't consistent throughout high school (Maeve)

There were some students who attended multiple secondary schools and mentioned there was a lack of consistency of support provided depending on the school they attended.

> some schools noticed me struggling. Others didn't (Kelly)

> however I moved schools a lot and some schools were more supportive than others (Louise)

Discussion

This study has explored the experiences of students with ARD receiving support and accommodations in secondary school, foregrounding their voice on the positive aspects

of the support available, and areas in which support can be strengthened and improved. Students reported a variety of beneficial academic accommodations and social and emotional support, including support implemented formally as well as that provided informally. A number of shortcomings of the support were also reported, and students clearly articulated suggested improvements. Their viewpoints presented consistent themes around tangible academic accommodations within and beyond the classroom, assessment and non-assessment-based support, experiences of care and understanding from staff, the visibility and accessibility of support, as well as the efficacy of counseling services. There were positive and negative attributes identified across the variety of topics which may demonstrate the inconsistencies present within the education sector, across independent, public, and private secondary school environments.

Academic support

The academic accommodations provided to students during formal assessments, such as exams and assignments, were reported as largely beneficial, with extra time most referenced by students. Students noted that these accommodations positively impacted their performance, as well as reduced their stress. These positive impacts were also echoed for external assessments with students often referring to special provisions provided throughout their external exams (HSC). Essentially, students described the opportunity to be able to equitably demonstrate their understanding and learning which is a fundamental aspect of inclusive practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). These findings provide student voice to bolster the understanding of the multi-faceted approach to inclusion as descried by Schwab et al. (2018), in which academic, social, and emotional well-being are readily intertwined not only in their implementation but also, in their effect (Antoninis et al., 2020).

The accessibility of assessment support for statewide and national assessments was highlighted as a concern. Students felt the application process was lengthy and burdensome. While some students reported receiving assistance with this process from their school, which reduced their stress throughout the process, others did not receive this support. These findings provide a perspective on the study by Davies et al. (2016) that uncovered the significant decline in students attaining accommodations in external testing when compared to in the classroom. Unsurprisingly, students expressed desires to improve the ease of access, either through school administrative support or the application process itself, whilst also improving visibility within this space.

Beyond assessments, students provided praise for accommodation considerations both within and outside the classroom. This primarily included the use of breaks during class for students who experienced physical pain or anxiety. In addition, some students mentioned additional services and practices as beneficial, such as free after school tutoring and an ESL teacher. As articulated by Thurlow (2014) the majority of literature focuses on the effectiveness of assessment accommodations, however this study highlights the holistic element of inclusion, in that students have noted benefits of in class adjustments beyond assessment accommodations. Indeed, it was both in class and assessment accommodations that led students to express positive impacts on them completing school and experiencing a positive learning journey.

Where effective in-class adjustments were lacking, students requested there be greater learning accommodations within their classroom. Students identified their desire for more flexible ways of learning, more flexible time arrangements to complete classwork and tasks, and improved access to breaks. These students are advocating for learning experiences and environments which meet their diverse strengths and needs. Inclusive strategies such as differentiation (Lindner & Schwab, 2020) and universal design for learning (CAST, 2024) may provide a way to reduce the barriers these students have faced, noting the recognition that for true inclusion, student diversity should be valued, celebrated, and catered for (Woodcock et al., 2022); a sentiment to which this study lends the crucial lens of student voice.

It is known that for some students with ARD, absences from school due to a health condition or appointments can impact their ability to engage in the day-to-day workings of secondary school (Hinton & Kirk, 2015). These absences were experienced by a portion of students in this study, with one describing it as a situation of "academic life and death." This was felt through the desperation of attempting to "catch up" on learning whilst also managing their illness and doing so without access to learning resources while away from the classroom. The impact of this on students, including the increased stress, complexity, and challenge, is recognized, with the current suggestions for improvement primarily based on improving teacher training (Capurso & Dennis, 2017; Hinton & Kirk, 2015). However, students in this study suggested support that extended beyond the often-impractical option of borrowing a peer's book to catch up independently, particularly when further absences were unpredictable and uncontrollable (i.e., their peer's book may not be returned at a predictable time). As stated by Antoninis et al. (2020) inclusive practice should reduce barriers to learning. Therefore, this study highlights the need to reconsider how inclusive practice could better support students who are absent from the classroom who may be experiencing numerous additional barriers to their education.

Social and emotional support

Students repeatedly described experiences of informal and formal social and emotional support through engagement with teachers, mentors, and paraprofessionals which demonstrated that inclusive practice extends beyond tangible and academic accommodations to the affective experience of support (Hitches et al., 2025). These experiences were centered on students feeling a level of personalized care and support that was founded on genuine human connection, having someone to talk to, and feeling heard. This feeling of care was bolstered when staff would follow up with them at a later date, something also valued by students in higher levels of education (Hitches et al., 2025). Some students also discussed interactions with staff who provided guidance, motivational support, as well as practical skills such as for sleep and navigating friendships, and these were attributed to an overall increase in social and emotional wellbeing. More specifically, students described these formal and informal interactions as beneficial in their reduction of stress and anxiety across all aspects of secondary school. Given the undesirable impacts of stress on students' learning capacity, performance, as well as physical and mental health, as highlighted by Pascoe et al. (2020), these findings

support the potential benefits of fostering social and emotional inclusion, not only academic inclusion. However, not all students reported positive social and emotional support with several students identifying experiences that were founded on feeling ignored and judged by staff. These experiences often lead students to suggest improving the education and awareness of mental health and its impacts within the secondary school setting. With 1 in 5 secondary school aged students experiencing high psychological distress during a school year (Lawrence et al., 2015) this may be beneficial for a number of students, and even more pertinent considering challenges students may face coping with this stress (Headspace, 2021).

Counseling

Regarding formal wellbeing support, several students disclosed engaging with their school counselor, reporting that they received positive outcomes and practical skills on how to effectively process their emotions, as well as mediation sessions and supports to gain academic accommodations. However, this represented only a minority of experiences as the majority of students expressed concerns around their counselors' lack of competence to provide empathetic and confidential support based on their needs, building on prior research around stigma and privacy (O'Connor & Coyne, 2017). Students shared experiences of feeling invalidated due to discomfort, judgment, and dismissal. Some reported being laughed at or told that others' problems were more important. This sense of inadequacy led to an environment where students found it easier to turn to their peers, trusted teachers, or, in some cases, chose to handle their struggles on their own, adding to the concerning wealth of evidence that outlines adolescents' unwillingness to seek supports from professional services (Lawrence et al., 2015), particularly if they feel the counselor does not care about them (Vilbas & King-Sears, 2023). It is worth noting that in the secondary school context, Moore et al. (2016) previously identified that it is likely that many students are first-time help seekers, hence it is pivotal for this experience to match the desires of initial supports. Unfortunately, if these expectations are not reached, it can have a lifelong impact on help-seeking tendencies with one student articulating their reluctance to seek supports as an adult based on their experience with their school counselor in secondary school. Although, a significant amount of responses constructed a negative viewpoint on counseling, the variety of experiences perhaps reflects the lack of consistency in the policy and frameworks that exist in Australia on the implementation of counseling in education (Harris, 2013).

These negative experiences created a strong link toward students being able to provide several suggestions to improve counseling. Students requested improved autonomy in accessing the services, clearer parameters around confidentiality, and a desire for an interaction founded on empathy. Additionally, students recommended an increase in session availability and increasing the variety of counselors accessible. Although the viability and feasibility of increased variety is worth further consideration, the lack of availability felt by students demonstrates the research on the challenging counselor to student ratios (Harris, 2013) and overwhelming caseloads for counselors (DeKruyf et al., 2013). Ultimately, the impacts of social and emotional supports are not to be underestimated, with research highlighting there are clear links between student mental

well-being and academic success (Gruman et al., 2013). Hence, there is a need to explore the frameworks and policies that exist in schooling on mental well-being supports and how these may meet their desired outcomes for the student experience.

Visibility and consistency

Within the academic, social, and emotional realms, a consistent theme that transpired from student responses was related to the need to increase students' knowledge of supports available for them to access. This adds a precursor to the findings of Baker and Scanlon (2016) as not only can students feel uninformed to take advantage of their accommodations, but further to lack knowledge of its existence in the first place. Students referred to a desire for increased promotion due to a lack of visibility of available support, with some suggesting that had they had knowledge of their entitlements they would have significantly benefited, whilst others wished they had found their supports sooner. Although inclusion is widely referenced as multi-dimensional (Schwab et al., 2018), perhaps this lack of visibility innately undermines the role of the *student* in the practice of inclusion itself.

This request for greater visibility of available support was in stark contrast to the need for students not to be seen by peers as receiving this support. A variety of students felt stigma associated with accessing both academic and social and emotional support, primarily when being visibly removed from the classroom in front of their peers. This left these students feeling "different," with another participant sharing that although they had positive experiences around support, they were still openly referred to as the "specials." Experiences like these perhaps shed light on the strong theme from students on their eagerness for more discreet modes of accessing and initiating contact with support services. These elements of micro-exclusion and labeling play a pivotal role in diminishing a student's sense of belonging and undermine true inclusive educational experiences (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Woodcock et al., 2022).

Students also expressed concerns around inconsistencies of support provided between different schools and between different departments, both academically and socially, which impacted their access to support and how effectively it was implemented. This was experienced by students who had attended several different secondary schools and noted that some were more attentive and conducive to providing support than others. This discrepancy might be attributed to the body of research that demonstrates the disparity in the practices, funding, and understanding of inclusion that is present within education (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012; Hardy & Woodcock, 2014. Furthermore, although there are multiple policies and frameworks that exist in Australia supporting the enactment of inclusion (Department of Education, 2024), the way it manifests in a secondary school setting is primarily dependent on the school. However, students continued to describe inconsistencies in their access to accommodations even within schools, such as between one department and another, which Pearce et al. (2010) noted is innately specific to the secondary school context. This was experienced by students who described being offered supports but these not being effectively disclosed to all applicable staff which resulted in difficulties in access. As a result, students expressed desires to improve the

communication between relevant staff to create a consistently dependable access to their supports and accommodations.

Implications

This study showcased the variety of student experiences regarding both academic and social and emotional supports provided to those with ARD throughout secondary school. Students clearly articulated the benefits of both academic and social and emotional support, which was provided in both formal and informal ways. In preservice teacher training, counselor training, and ongoing staff professional development, staff should be empowered to recognize the positive impact they can have on students' experiences, that an inclusive climate extends beyond simply academic support, and students express substantial benefits for their wellbeing from the care and guidance they receive, even when provided informally. Not only are academic accommodations beneficial to students' performance and reduction in stress, but so too the social and emotional support they receive.

A consistent theme present across both aspects of formal academic and social and emotional support, were students' desire to increase the awareness of the supports that are available to them. In practice, the implication of this finding is varied and should account for the diversity of individual school communities and available resources, but could be achieved through student induction or general promotion. Regardless, the findings from this study indicate that this may put the student in a more empowered position to take charge of their learning and wellbeing, particularly in the senior years to support transitions to this model of support for those going on to further study. In addition, when creating these connection points for support, this study also indicated the participants' want for more discreet modes of access. In terms of how this can be practically applied in practice is worth further consideration and discussion.

Specifically considering students' academic support experiences, students expressed concerns about access to learning and accommodations, and the consistency of accommodations available. Students expressed their struggles to navigate gaining access to additional supports in external exams due to the rigorous application process. These findings echoed prior research on the alarming drop in accommodations students access during external assessments when compared to inside the classroom (Davies et al., 2016). Hence, students have a desire for the processes to be less administrative and noted significant benefits when the school provided support throughout the application process. Additionally, based on this study the visibility of the available exam provisions in the first instance should be considered. External exams are used widely across the globe, therefore there is the need to consider the processes and frameworks that are in place to support students gaining provisions in this space to ensure students are informed and have the opportunity for equitable performance of their skillset and understanding. For those students wishing to use external performance measures to enter tertiary education, it is crucial they are enabled to perform to the best of their personal capabilities considering the long-term positive implications for employment of obtaining a university degree (Ma et al., 2016), as well as broader benefits to society and the economy (Chan, 2016).

Similarly, it is essential that students can access appropriate educational accommodations throughout their secondary school studies to enable them to learn and perform

to their fullest potential, setting them up for positive outcomes, whether that be for future employment or further study. Not only did a lack of awareness of available supports at times hamper students' access to such support, but so too did the consistency in how these were obtained and implemented. Given the fluid landscape of secondary school, it would be crucial to ensure that communication was clear across the subject departments. However, these findings indicate that perhaps there is more to be done in either teacher education on incorporating accommodations in their own classroom or in communication requirements.

Additionally, this study determined that students experience micro-exclusion even when they are absent from school and are attempting to reengage with their missed learning. The reality is that all students will be absent at times throughout their secondary school education, whether for illness, difficult circumstances, or training as an athlete, and inclusion should be able to cater to this reality. The findings from this study indicate that more research may be required on how schools can best support absences, rather than simply "borrowing a peer's book." Considering current technological affordances, innovative strategies to support student engagement, or at least access to learning materials, should be explored.

Finally, a notable amount of student responses related to encounters with school counselors. Although, there were some students who expressed positive experiences, it is evident from the results that there are many more in this sample who have had unpleasant and unhelpful interactions that have the potential to lead to a lifelong lack of desire to seek emotional support. This finding indicates that it is imperative that school counselors include honesty on confidentiality requirements and a genuine care for students as part of their practice. However, in saying that, the lack of variety of options of potential school counselors that exist within a school may also play a part in this context. Future research may explore the extent of such student experiences, triangulated with qualitative accounts from counselors, and consider how best staff and students can be supported to have experiences conducive to student wellbeing.

Limitations

This study utilized qualitative data purposefully sampled from university students who were retrospectively self-reporting on their experience in secondary school and the findings should be interpreted within this context. As a result, it should be noted that student responses could have been influenced by external factors, including social desirability and time frame, however, the diversity of experiences, both positive and negative, suggest that this has not largely impacted the findings of this study. The respondents were from a spectrum of ages (e.g., 4 of the 76 students were aged 30 or above), thus it should be acknowledged that some participants could have experienced school prior to inclusion being readily implemented in their secondary classrooms. It could also be considered that students who have reached university level study have sufficiently overcome barriers in their secondary schooling with or without student support and future research may sample students whose post-school pathways differed from university level study. Finally, due to the anonymity of the survey, participants may have felt more inclined to share honestly and without fear of backlash, however this presented a limitation for further follow-up and clarification opportunities on

student responses. Thus, this could be an area of future research to consider conducting qualitative research through interviewing or codesigning solutions based on student voice.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the support and accommodations that are provided in the secondary school context through the voice of the student experience. The findings from this study shed light on the power and strength of connection and care within education and its impact on not only the overall wellbeing of students, but also inherently their motivation and desire to engage in learning. Social and emotional support was just as important as academic support. The findings presented a variety of strengths and weaknesses to inclusion in practice, however, there were consistent themes relating to challenges around accessibility, awareness, and consistency across both academic and social emotional supports. A number of students expressed concern over their experiences with counseling support, and students conveyed reluctance to seek future support based on this experience. As part of the study, the participants were given the opportunity to provide suggestions on ways to improve the secondary school journey for students with ARD. Students suggested, for example, improving the processes for applying for academic provisions, the creation of better access to learning when absent, and the desire for improved communication between all stakeholders. Students also remind inclusive practitioners of the dangers of micro-exclusion and the need for discrete modes of support at this stage of life. Of key importance throughout students' responses was that positive academic and social and emotional support not only impacted their performance, but supported students in reducing stress, whereas a lack of support did the opposite. The impacts of the intangibles within education should not be understated. In education, there is importance placed on research, policy, and frameworks, however, this study reminds us that our students have a voice too, because at the end of the school day, they are the receivers of inclusion and that should not be forgotten.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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