Problems with the education system leading to mental health issues

I am writing this submission as a response to the Interim Report from the inquiry into Mental Health. I believe an important issue has been missed in the inquiry so far and in the interim report. That is the impact that special school education and education for students with disability more generally can have on peoples mental health long term.

It is not just the bullying, but the exclusion and belittling of students with disability that has a long-term effect. I have experienced being at community primary schools, a special school (that had nothing special about it) and a local high school so I know what this means.

The interim report talks about the need for more anti-bullying programs in schools and the need for better pre-service training for teachers, but it leaves out many structural problems in the education system, especially in special schools. The way that the whole system puts down students with disability is as much a bullying problem as personal confrontations in the schoolyard. It also ignores the very real problem of teachers and school staff being the bullies themselves.

The inquiry needs to have a close look at this problem before it finishes. If you are "different" or have needs that are not mainstream, then you are prone to bullying by the system as well as bullying from other kids.

The experience of exclusion for students with disability has been shown to lead to poor education outcomes, but the issue and experience of ongoing trauma and mental health problems is pretty much ignored, meaning that the system and the people in it keep doing harmful things to people.

My experience at a special school was traumatic and has led me to be isolated and depressed. There was no questioning of the way the special school treated me and others at the time because it was the people in charge that were the bullies themselves. As far as I can see from looking at social media, no changes have occurred. I fear that special schools are still doing harm to other students, not just me.

I went to a special school in the Bayside area of Melbourne as my local high school had rejected my enrolment on the basis of disability and the disability support at other high schools in my area was equally poor, so I had no other option than to go to a special school. This was also the advice from my psychologist, who thought I would be safer in a special school. This turned out to be really bad advice as many people's ideas of what goes in special schools are more fantasy than reality. They think that special schools offer specialist education, which isn't true.

I am in contact with a number of people with ASD who have had equally traumatic experiences, both at mainstream and special schools and they have PTSD from it. This is a problem that is widespread, but not recognised enough and is something that the mental health and education systems need to focus on urgently in the future, and this inquiry needs to tell them to do it.

I want to make a few key points, even though it happened 11 to 13 years ago and has largely dominated my thinking since then and affected my life.

Bullying

- The school allowed severe bullying to happen with no intervention and there was no anti-bullying program. It was way worse than what I experienced at primary school, where at least most staff and students were kind and caring.
- I was called a "girl" and a "she-male" due to having long hair. I was also teased about stupid things like football teams and my interests (e.g. retro music like Bob Dylan or Santana or music of my childhood).
- I was physically attacked at times.
- The school should have actually been looking out for personal development of each student, but this did not happen with so much bullying and abuse happening between students.
- Teachers and other staff like coordinators were rude and authoritarian and made me feel helpless and angry.
- When I did complain about the bullying and violence, it was often dismissed by staff and instead I got in trouble for complaining.

Low expectations of students

- The students were treated like they were at kindergarten and were forced to do work at that level. Any student that wanted to learn had trouble because they wouldn't provide decent education for each individual and their level. One student's parents wanted him to do more work on literacy in year 10 and the school told them that they wouldn't because it wasn't part of the program.
- Just because we had disabilities didn't mean that we could not develop skills and confidence, but the school was so authoritarian that students were kept juvenile so they were easier to control.
- The school would rather be draconian and keep students down than use learning opportunities to teach the students about responding to different situations and understand the world more deeply. An example of this was when a few students were caught looking at Internet pornography while at school. Rather than teaching kids about sex education or the difference between public and private activities and the realities of pornography, the principal took the blunt step of telling the IT teacher to block Google on the school Internet settings to stop the students from accessing the sites. Because of this, all students at the school ended up being affected for the actions of a few, which was unfair. Those students had no chance to learn from the experience and about pornography and social expectations; they

just got in trouble, as usual. These were really important lessons but the school didn't care. I used to look at different music websites through the day (in class and in free time) and they also blocked access to Bob Dylan's website, which was one I went to often. They didn't tell me they did it though, as they just wanted to control what the students did so I didn't understand what was wrong, if anything. Because we were considered to be incapable of learning, the school would just disempower students through the application of rules and discipline and this made me feel bad about myself. It was like bad babysitting.

- We did a lot of time-wasting activities instead of real learning, like watching movies and going on outings with no purpose (including a visit to Moorabbin Police Station, which was supposed to teach us about the horrors of cyber-bullying, but it was ironic and made no difference), which didn't prepare me well for adult life.

Abuse and neglect

- In Year 10 in 2009, I was on a Community Access program at Westfield Southland and the teacher picked me to go up to the Information Desk to ask where a certain shop was. Because I have social anxiety, this was really confronting, so I held back as I was scared and I didn't know what to say. She physically pushed me up to the desk and I told her "Get off!" as I was shocked and scared. After that she said what I did was "a disgrace". Later on that same outing, I lost my wallet and when I asked the teacher for help she was at first reluctant to help me search for it due to my "behaviour" at the desk, so I "apologised" to her to convince her to let me go back for it. The odd thing is that she often told us, "Two rules: be where you are meant to be and treat others with respect". She had no respect at all. Even though I had been at the school for two years by then they had no idea of what ASD was or how to help students with ASD like me.
- Since my mum worked till 3 pm every Monday and Tuesday, I had to take the bus home and the bullying on there was equally as bad. The bus driver and supervisor were very old and grumpy and one time in Year 8, I swore at the supervisor as he told me off for fighting off another student who was teasing me. He told the "guidance counsellor" (Mr. Frond from *Bob's Burgers* and Mr. Mackey from *South Park*, both my favourite TV shows, are at least somewhat kind and caring compared to her) about the incident and she and my teacher (who was the only decent one I had in my time there) had a talk and I got banned from the computer for a week, which meant I didn't learn anything at all. Then another time after a similar incident where the supervisor was picking on me, he followed me to my house after I got off the bus to keep telling me off and I told him "Get the FUCK off my property!" and he got sarcastic and left. I felt terrible that I was going to get in trouble again, although he was the one that caused the problem. These sorts of events were really upsetting and led to me being treated badly by the school.
- One time, I was walking with two of my friends and someone called one of them a "fat pig". We went to complain to one of the teachers about it, but she did nothing and got angry with us instead. This angered my parents

so much that they held a meeting with her about it. It escalated into a huge argument, which got so bad that the principal had to be brought in. She said she would do something about the bullying problem, but nothing changed. These were empty words.

- While I was still the special school, an ex-student created a hate group about the school on Facebook and got me involved. He wrote a lot of angry and threatening posts about the school and the staff, which concerned the "guidance counsellor" and the student got in trouble with the police, who told him that if he did it again, there would be even more trouble.

- The school didn't provide any programs that prepared me for future life. I left early in 2009 and went to a local high school in another area as we had moved house, which was better as I was respected by the teachers for the work I did and had better friends. It was still hard at school though and a few months after my grandfather died I dropped out.

Since School

- Most of the last eleven years since I've left school, I've felt lonely, isolated and had a lot of emotional and psychological issues from that period to get through. I've stayed at home a lot with my animals (three birds – including my best friend Leunig the Cockatiel - a cat and two dogs) and I rarely go out, except to the library, record shops and with my support worker (every Monday). I am working on getting more independent, but the bad school experiences have held me back.

- I have done a few big projects like researching the family tree and have gone around to a few cemeteries to photograph graves of relatives, made contact with distant family members and scanned vintage family photos from the 50s through to the 90s, which is very important since most of the people in those classic photos are now either growing older or have since died.

- The last few years, I've tried to repair my life again and have begun socialising with fellow Aspies who are very kind and caring and I've formed happy friendships with many of them, especially online. All these Aspie social groups are ones started by individuals and are not supported by any service or organisation. There aren't many good social support programs on offer from any funded organisations so people have had to do it themselves. This has its benefits but it also means that the system gets away with not doing its job of supporting people. This inquiry needs to recommend better programs to help people into adult life after school and to be able to live meaningful lives. The schools don't do this and generally don't care what happens when you leave – only that you actually leave.

- A story I've been keeping up with recently is the abuse of a student with Autism who has recently been bullied at another special school for students with Autism. The principal there was the second assistant principal at my special school in 2008/09. Like at my school, it is terrible that any abuse occurs to students. The same principal got an Inclusion Award last year, which is very embarrassing because special schools don't

do inclusion by definition. We need something to make a real change in the way students with disabilities are treated in schools and so to hear these things is really disappointing.

What should happen at special schools in the future?

There are lot of things that need to change but I'd like this inquiry to recommend:

- Better mental health support for students with disabilities.
- Reform to provide real education, not bad babysitting.
- Better support to transition from school to adult life and work.
- Better support for social engagement.