



Consulting students with disability: A practice guide for educators and other professionals



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The logo for Queensland University of Technology (QUT), featuring the letters 'QUT' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font on a white background.



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For a presentation by Haley Tancredi on student consultation, visit The Centre For Inclusive Education website <https://research.qut.edu.au/c4ie/events/consulting-students-with-disability-research-to-practice-series/>

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Introduction

What is consultation?

Consultation is the process of inviting someone to communicate their thoughts, opinions and feelings about a process, situation, or event, to someone who can help change that situation or event for the person who has been consulted. Consultation is about improving practices and processes, making decisions that foreground the student and their learning, and being responsive to the student's preferences.

Consultation is a proactive, intentional, and collaborative process.

Being able to engage in consultation is an essential life skill. When a person is consulted, they can contribute to changes in their life. Learning how to have a say in issues that affect you starts at school. Some children and young people are naturally confident to "have their say". However, there are many students who require support to have the same opportunities to be consulted and learn the skills of self-advocacy. For students with disability, consultation processes need to be accessible (Tancredi, 2020).

Central to inclusive education, where students become **active participants** in their learning (Ainscow, 2004).

In Australia, all students with disability must be consulted about the reasonable adjustments that are designed and implemented to enable them to access and participate in education. The obligations to both consult students and to implement reasonable adjustments are outlined within international human rights conventions and Australian legislation. These legal foundations will be discussed on page 5.

What consultation is *not*...

Some actions that take place in schools are not consistent with genuine consultation. Consultation is not "letting a parent know" about a decision that has already been made. It is not telling a student what you plan to do. It is not having a student agree to or sign off on a learning plan. It is not reactive, an afterthought or an ad-hoc process.

Consultation and agency

Consultation has the potential to enable students to experience agency freedom (Sen, 1992). This can occur when students have the opportunity to both make choices, *and* contribute to and improve the range of choices that are available.

When students have opportunities to be consulted, they engage as agents who can **contribute** to pedagogical refinements (Tancredi, 2020).

About this guide

This guide is designed to help educators and other professionals working in schools to uphold the obligation to consult students with disability, and to provide accessible consultation processes. This guide commences with an overview of the legal foundations for consultation, and discusses what is meant by "accessible consultation". Then, the roles of different stakeholders will be discussed. The main aim of this guide is to provide practical guidance to educators and other professionals to prepare and conduct accessible consultative conversations with students. This guide contains evidence-based tips, ideas and resources are presented and available for educators and other professionals to use in schools and other education contexts.



Legal foundations

International legal foundations

Children have the right to education and the right to express opinions about issues that concern them (United Nations, 1989).

Children and young people with disability have the right to an *inclusive* education, as defined in General Comment No. 4 on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2016).

Inclusion is defined as:

“a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment” (paragraph 11).

Students with disability also have the right to be *consulted*, through **accessible consultation processes** (United Nations, 2018). General Comment 7 on Article 24 of the CRPD states:

“States parties should also ensure that consultation processes are accessible... and must provide support, funding and reasonable accommodation as appropriate and requested, to ensure the participation of representatives of all persons with disabilities in consultation processes” (paragraph 45).

Australia has signed and ratified the CRPD, which means we are bound by these obligations.

Australian legal foundations

In Australia, the rights of people with disability are articulated in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA; Commonwealth of Australia). The DDA makes it illegal to discriminate against someone because that person has a disability. The DDA covers a range of areas. For example, applying for a job, accessing public transport, accommodation, and accessing and participating in education.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE; Commonwealth of Australian) sit under the DDA. The DSE describe the obligations of educators and others working in schools, to ensure students with disability can access and participate in education, on the same basis as their peers who do not have a disability.

Two obligations as per the DSE are the obligation to provide reasonable adjustments and the obligation to “consult the student” or their associate (relative or carer) to ensure that the adjustments designed and implemented are deemed reasonable (Paragraph 3.5, p. 15). This obligation must take place before adjustments are implemented and students must be involved in reviewing the success of the adjustment/s.





Accessible consultation

Who is at risk of not fully participating in consultation?

Consultation is a communicative process. This means that students who experience communication difficulties and/or disorder may experience barriers within the consultation process, which will impact their ability to participate and share their insights. Therefore, consultation processes must be accessible. Accessible consultation is a particularly important consideration for students with communication difficulties. Around 13 % of students in Australian classrooms experience communication difficulties or disability (McLeod & McKinnon, 2007). This broad group will include students with Developmental Language Disorder, Speech Sound Disorder, hearing impairment, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and students on the autism spectrum. Students who experience emotional and behavioural difficulties are also likely to experience undiagnosed communication difficulties (Clegg et al., 2009; Ripley & Yuell, 2005). Therefore, working to minimise or eliminate barriers in the consultation process from the outset will maximise participation for students with disability.

What barriers might exist?

Consultative conversations require those involved to engage in high level reflection, negotiation and problem-solving (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020). Students will need to listen to and interpret questions. They need to process information that is presented in the discussion for meaning, then integrate it with their own ideas and opinions. Through the process of consultation, the student will need to synthesise and prioritise important information and contribute to a plan of action or goal. The pace, linguistic complexity, degree of complex and abstract content, and demands on working memory can all result in possible participation barriers for a student with communication difficulties (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020; Tancredi, 2020).

Educators have reported not always having an adequate understanding of communication difficulties (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001). This may result in teachers not recognising when students are experiencing difficulty, and during consultation, inadequate adjustments may be in place. For this reason, it is important to consider what barriers the student may be experiencing.

Accessible consultation means that students can understand the content of a consultative conversation, can comprehend the questions that are posed to them, and are able to communicate a response that reflects their perspective (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020, p. 281)

Barrier may exist in...

- ⇒ **The way questions are worded.** Questions need to use vocabulary that is familiar to and understood by the student. The linguistic structure of the questions posed also need to be simple, direct and able to be comprehended by the student.
- ⇒ **The requirement to engage with reflective questioning.** Students may require support to recall experiences and express their opinions.
- ⇒ **Excessive demands on cognitive load.** Students must hold the interviewer's questions in their verbal working memory, in order to use this information to formulate their a response.
- ⇒ **Requisite access to vocabulary** to express opinions and ideas. For students to share their insights, they must be able to access the vocabulary they wish to use to express their insights and to convey their message with specificity.





Roles and responsibilities

Students

All students, including students with disability, must be at the centre of the learning and teaching process for genuine inclusion to take place (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020). Students have the right to be consulted about their learning *and* to have their teachers, school leaders and other professionals listen to them, in whatever way they choose to communicate their insights (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018). For some students, they may wish to verbally express their learning preferences and requirements. For other students, they may prefer to communicate in another mode (e.g. through images or text) or have a parent or carer support them throughout the consultation process. Information that you can use to help explain consultation to students is available on Page 16.

Students' role in consultation is to have a voice, to be trusted, and to have their opinions and insights valued and responded to. It is important to discuss trust with the student, its limits and its benefits. Having this discussion shows that the students are valued and respected enough to make their own decisions.

Parent/s and carers

Parents and carers have a critical role to play in consultation. Partnering with parents is critical in inclusive education, and is complementary to student consultation processes. For younger children, parents may need to be present during consultative conversations and may support their child to express their insights. Older students, their parent/carer and educators can discuss the role of parents/carers in consultation.

Educators

Educators play an important role in consultation. They may be the person who actively consults the student. Critically, educators will use the insights that students have shared with them to take action and refine their teaching practices.

Other professionals

Other professionals, such as a school counsellor or speech pathologist, can play an important role in consultation. They may be involved in consultative conversations or may assist other team members to maximise the accessibility of the consultation process. Alternatively, another professional may act as a broker of information.

Engaging a broker

Sometimes, the power relationship that exists between students and teachers may mean that students may wish to share their insights and be consulted by someone who is not their teacher (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020). This person may be another teacher (such as a case manager or pastoral leader), a school counsellor or speech pathologist or a specialist teacher. This person can act as a "broker of information" and can liaise with the students' teacher/s to communicate what the student has shared with teachers, who can then design and implement adjustments.





Before consultation commences

To ensure that consultation is a proactive, intentional, collaborative process, the consultative process needs to start before the first consultative conversation. An important first step is to ensure that parents/carers are aware that consultation is going to take place, so that they can support their child.

Build rapport

For students, talking about what helps (or does not help) them at school and students' sharing personal insights into their learning requires that students trust the adults they are working with. It is essential that before consultation commences, students have the opportunity to build rapport and a positive relationship with the adult/s who are going to be working with them during consultative conversations. Rapport can be built through:

- Working in the student's classroom and spending time with them and their peers during learning activities
- Learning about the student's interests, preferences and strengths—both related to education and outside of school
- Allied health professionals, psychologists or other support professionals may use assessment sessions and build in time for rapport building activities
- Teachers may set up classroom tasks that enable all students to build teacher-student relationships.

Set up a supportive environment

Consultative conversations should always be conducted in an environment where the student is comfortable and feels supported. The room where you meet can make or break the student's level of comfort and trust in the process. Some tips:

- Avoid meeting in "the office" block. Many students will view this as a place where students go for discipline. Try to use a room that is private, but not associated with negative experiences.
- Ensure that the furniture in the room is laid out so that you and the student are "side by side" rather than sitting and facing each other across a desk. A neutral seating plan will help the student feel "on the same level" as the person they are meeting with.
- Take note of where the windows are in the room and how the desk and seats are set up. Many students will feel uncomfortable if they are facing a window, where peers may walk past.
- Make sure the room is not too hot or too cold.
- Check that conversations in the room cannot be heard by people outside of the room.

Tips for developing rapport with students

- ⇒ **Be aware of your body language.** Smile and use your body language to demonstrate that you are engaged and eager to be working with the student. Be an active listener, ask questions and show your student that you are engaged and interested in what they are saying. Use natural eye contact but don't insist that the student looks at you. For some students, eye contact can be difficult and overwhelming.
- ⇒ **Monitor the student and be aware of signs of discomfort.** Some students may become uncomfortable if teachers are in close proximity to them. Get to know your student and read their body language so you can give them the space they require in order to feel safe and respected.
- ⇒ **When visiting a classroom,** move around the classroom and **engage with a range of students.** Show that you are available to work with all interested students, and that you are not "singling students out"
- ⇒ **Ask the student about what they like** to do when they are not at school. Be prepared and have some basic knowledge about popular computer games, YouTubers or current sporting events. This will help you to ask questions, contribute to discussions, and show that you are actively listening.
- ⇒ **Talk about your own interests.** Share appropriate information about yourself. Discuss sports that you enjoy, talk about your pets or share what you are watching on Netflix. This will give the student an insight into who you are.



Preparing questions and stimulus materials

Questions

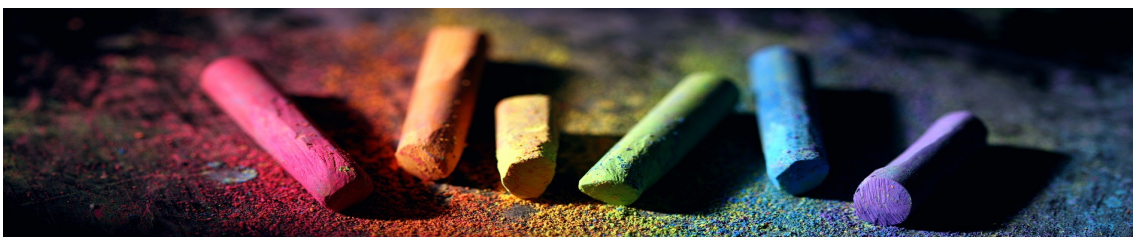
Asking the student questions is an important aspect of consultation. Remember: For questions to be accessible, the student needs to be both familiar with the vocabulary used in the questions, *and* questions need to be asked using sentence structures that the student can comprehend.

As Gillett-Swan and colleagues (2020) describe, interviews can be structured (where questions adhere to a set protocol), semi-structured (where questions are presented and additional prompts are given, expanding the conversation beyond the main questions) or open-ended (where there are no set questions). For students with communication difficulties, semi-structured interviews have been shown to be effective.

The below questions are adapted from Tancredi (2020) and can be used by educators and other professionals to ask questions during consultation:

1. What helps you to learn?
2. Can you remember any teachers that you found it easy to learn from? What made their classes easy to learn in?
3. When you think of the best teacher you've ever had, what did they do that helped?
4. How can teachers help you understand instructions?
5. How can teachers help you show what you've learned?
6. What could all of your teachers do that would help you learn?
7. Is there anything that you wish your teachers knew about you and how you learn?

Questions that draw on student's experiences and ask them to relate to "what has worked" and "what has not worked" for them and their learning can support students to engage in consultation.



Using activities

Photos as conversation stimulus: For example, some researchers have asked children to give adults a tour of their school and given the child a camera to record images of spaces that are meaningful to them (Merrick & Roulstone, 2011). Extending on this, students could take photos of places or tasks where they experience learning success. These images could then be used as stimulus materials in consultative conversations.

Creative arts: Young children have been consulted successfully using drawing, painting and craft activities, where students are asked to design their ideal learning space using drawing and collage (Kucks & Hughes, 2019). Hands-on activities such as this could be incorporated into consultation processes, to support students to express their ideas and insights.

Brainstorming: Divide a piece of paper into 4-6 sections and use written stimulus questions to brainstorm ideas. See an example on Page 14.

Mind mapping and concept mapping: Recording insights through mind maps and concept maps can support students with disability to organise their ideas, identify important information and expand on reflections that they share. These activities can create a static, visual record of the student's ideas and insights, which can help students expand on their ideas and can help the adult to ask further questions and establish shared meaning (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020; Tancredi, 2020). Remember to:

- ⇒ Start with a blank sheet of paper
- ⇒ Ask the student if they want to write/draw, or they would prefer the adult to
- ⇒ Colour-code related ideas and use colour to emphasise important points
- ⇒ Keep the mind maps so you can come back to them at future discussions



During consultation

Consultation activities

Students can be involved in consultation through interviews, involvement in student support team processes, or small-group student discussions (Gillett-Swan et al., 2020). Working with the student and their parent/carer to decide how consultation will take place, or which combination of activities will be employed, is the first step.

Who is going to be present?

It is important to be clear on who will be present at the consultative conversation. Ensure you communicate who will be present with the student and their parent/carer. Research with students has shown that students want to know who will be involved in consultation, and students need to have a pre-existing relationship with those involved (Woolfson et al., 2006; 2008). Consultation may take place in a one on one conversation with the student and one adult, or it may be a small-group discussion. It is important to plan ahead around who will be involved, with the student and their parent/carer.

Recording the conversation

To make sure you are able to actively engage in the conversation, consider audio-recording the conversation. This will enable you to come back to what the student said and transcribe the student's ideas. It is important to:

- ⇒ **Obtain** written consent from the student and their parent/carer before any audio-recording takes place
- ⇒ **Confirm** the student's consent to the audio recording before each discussion
- ⇒ **Store** the audio-recording in a secure location (not on a personal device)

If you do not audio-record the conversation, make sure you take brief notes. Hand-written notes may reduce disruption to the conversation, compared to taking notes on a device. Straight after the conversation, record your reflections and key ideas that the student shared with you. You can then check your record with the student, to ensure you have adequately captured their message.

Multiple conversations

Multiple conversations have been shown to support students with disability to communicate their ideas (Tancredi, 2020; Woolfson, 2006). A series of shorter conversations is preferable to one, longer conversation. The first conversation is likely to form part of rapport building with the student and provide an opportunity for the student to become familiar with the process of reflective questioning (Gillett-Swan et al, 2020).

Visual supports

Using visual supports has been shown to support students with disability to express their insights, ideas and experiences (Merrick & Roulstone, 2011; Tancredi, 2020). Images, drawing, visual organiser and lists can be pre-prepared (created before the conversation) or created during the conversation. The Menu of Adjustments (Tancredi, 2020) has been shown to be effective when students with language difficulties are consulted (see page 14). Students can select what helps them learn, or add to the lists and can support students to express their ideas and prioritise which education adjustments they feel support their learning. Another option is a series of images that can support a conversation about helpful teaching practices. See Page 15 for an example.

Developing a short questionnaire that uses text and/or images to outline some options that are available to students for a particular task can also be a useful visual support. In this kind of strategy, it is important that students can also add to the options that are available and that the adult completes the questionnaire *with* the student (see page 12).

Confirming the student's comprehension

Throughout consultative conversations, it is important that the student's comprehension is checked. The adult also needs to ensure that they share the student's intended meaning. There is a risk that students with communication difficulties may have difficulty expressing their ideas with precision and specificity. Visual supports, scaffolds and using activities in consultation and conducting multiple interviews can all support students to express their ideas and insights.



Follow up

Post-meeting follow up

In the research conducted by Woolfson and colleagues (2006; 2008), students with disability said that they wanted there to be follow up after the meeting. This could include a written or verbal summary of what was discussed and should clearly outline the agreed actions and decisions that were discussed.

Communication with parents/carers

Following the conversation, communicate via email or phone to let the student's family know that you have had a consultative conversation with them, and advise what the action plan is. Or, a follow-up meeting with the student's parent/carer may take place. It is important that the student's family know that consultation has taken place, because they can then check in with their child, as needed. Also, the family will then be aware that you have engaged in consultation, as required under the DSE.

Formal written record

Details about the consultative conversation/s must be recorded in the student's support notes. Include the date of the discussion, who was present, a summary of what took place, and the agreed actions and decisions.

Taking action

The most important part of consultation is using what the student has told you to adjust practice, with the goal of improving the student's education experience, engagement and/or academic outcomes. Depending on your role (teacher, support team, etc), the action you take will vary. If you have acted as a broker of information, your next step is to set up a meeting with the student's teacher/s and share what the student has told you, so you can collaborate on designing and implementing adjustments. If you are a class teacher, consider your upcoming curricular units and assessment and consider the adjustments that you will design and implement. You may wish to collaborate with another teacher or professional to develop these adjustments.

Review and follow up

Consultation is not a one-off event. After you have undertaken the initial consultative conversations and put some adjustments in place, make time to discuss what you have been doing with the student and seek their feedback. Regular junctures need to be set up to ensure that the adjustments can be reviewed and refined over time. Questions to consider are: has the adjustment been helping? What else would be helpful for the student? It might help to schedule short, regular discussions with the student (e.g. monthly) so that the student has the opportunity to maintain communication with you.








Example resource: Questionnaire

1. What can teachers do that helps you learn?
Tick the boxes that shows your choices.
2. Add other things that do/don't help in the blank boxes
3. Circle the **most** helpful thing teachers can do.



	 Not that helpful	 Kind of helpful	 Really helpful
I like it when teachers repeat instructions			
I like it when teachers use pictures or videos			
I like it when teachers break activities down into smaller parts			
I like it when the teacher checks in with me			



Example resource: Brainstorming matrix

What helps you to learn?

When you think of the best teacher you've ever had, what did they do that helped?

Can you remember any teachers that you found it easy to learn from? What made their classes easy to learn in?

Is there anything that you wish your teachers knew about you and how you learn?



Example resource: Menu of Adjustments

HOW TEACHERS TALK TO ME

- Say it slow / medium / fast
- Say it louder
- Give thinking / listening time
- I like whole class / small group / one on one instructions
- Get my attention

HOW TEACHERS GIVE INSTRUCTIONS (WRITTEN/SPOKEN)

- Give clear instructions
- Repeat using the same words
- Explain using different words
- Use less words / more words
- Break down instructions
- Show me with pictures / video / by doing

LESSON AND SUBJECT CONTENT

- Show me how the content fits with things I already know
- Help me understand what new words mean
- Help put new words into my work
- Be involved in choosing texts / sources
- Be involved in choosing how to show what I've learnt

CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT

- I want to sit ...
- More time to revise things we learn
- More time in exams / assignments
- Have someone take notes for me
- Record lessons and instructions



Instructions for use: Cut out the quadrants. During a consultative conversation, present each quadrant, one by one, to the student. Ask the student to select adjustments that would be helpful for them. Encourage the student to add to the list. Work with the student to identify the most helpful option/s.

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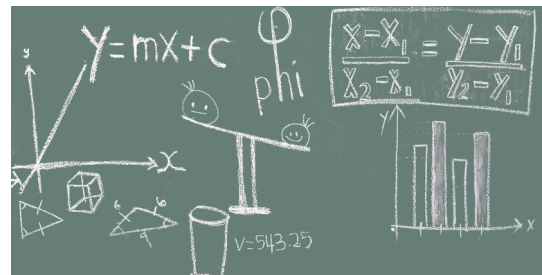


Example resource: What helps you learn?

Repeat instructions



Show me what to do with pictures
or video or by using examples



Explain things using simple words
and easier sentences

First we will...

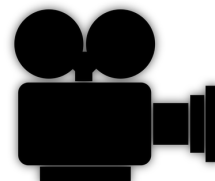


Next we will...



Then we will...

Have someone take notes for me or
video-record lessons



Instructions for use: Work with the student to identify the most helpful option/s and use these examples to support the student to add their own suggestions.



Information for students

I'd like to find out about what helps you learn.

Then, I can use your ideas in class.



If you can't think of everything today, that's okay. We can talk again on another day.



We will talk about what helps you learn. We can also use pictures, drawings and photos.



At the end, I will:

1. Write your ideas down
2. Check that I have understood what you have told me
3. Start using your ideas in class
4. Set up another time to talk, so we can see if what I am doing is working for you.





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