

**Submission
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INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Dancing around the behaviour crisis

Submission to the inquiry into teacher shortages in New South Wales

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There are several factors that influence teacher recruitment and retention. In this submission, I will focus on a highly significant one that is often overlooked.

When the results of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) came rolling in during December 2019, there was justifiable concern about the continued decline in performance of Australian 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science. Yet this was not the whole story. PISA also conducted a survey of students' experiences of school (OECD, 2019). As part of this survey, students were asked how often they encountered issues in their classrooms such as 'noise and disorder' or 'the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down'. From this, researchers constructed an 'index of disciplinary climate' and ranked countries from those with the best to those with the worst disciplinary climates. In 2018, of 76 countries surveyed, Australia ranked 69. In comparison, the United States ranked 28 and the United Kingdom, 24. New Zealand, ranked 66, was the only other major anglophone country at the same end of the ladder as Australia.

It is tempting to dismiss this as a chance result, but it is not. In the previous 2015 round of PISA, Australia ranked 63 out of 68 countries on disciplinary climate (OECD, 2016). There has been a crisis of behaviour in Australian classrooms for at least the last seven years.

We may therefore assume there would be a concerted focus on researching ways to improve the climate in Australian classrooms. And yet, when discussed at all, researchers and commentators tend to dance around the issue. Why? I will return to this question later.

We should bear in mind this squeamishness about naming the problem when we read articles on teacher recruitment and retention that focus on push factors such as stress and workload (Gundlach & Slempe, 2022; Southall et al., 2022). What could be causing this stress and what could be causing this workload? Part of the answer is linked to classroom behaviour and the ways that we attempt to manage it in Australian schools.

For example, a 2021 survey of 570 Australian teachers conducted by The NEiTA Foundation and the Australian College of Educators (ACE) notes that:

"Behaviour management was... frequently nominated by teachers as the greatest challenge they face. Teachers explained that just a small minority of disruptive students can have a large and negative impact on the majority, and that managing these behaviours takes even further time away from teaching. Sixty-eight per cent of teachers indicated that they spend more than 10% of their day managing individual student behavioural issues. Seventeen per cent said that this consumes over half their day"

Again, this is not an isolated finding. A larger 2019 survey of 2,444 teachers found that, 'student behaviour, community behaviour, behaviour of other staff members,' and, 'bullying and safety concerns for students and for teachers / peers' were recurring themes in response to a question asking teachers to describe the top challenges facing teaching and schools today (Heffernan et al., 2019).

Interestingly, the researchers did not explicitly mention this finding in their executive summary. Neither did they ask a direct question about behaviour in the survey. They did, however, ask whether teachers felt safe at work. While 81% replied that they did, a startling 19% – almost one in five – replied that they did not. Those who did not feel safe were asked to elaborate and, 'Respondents who raised concerns about their physical health and safety included concerns or shared stories about

violence or threats of violence.’ One respondent wrote about how she had confiscated knives from students and how she was punched in the stomach by a student while pregnant.

I suspect many of us would not wish to continue working under such conditions.

Understandably, when asked, early career teachers tend to request better training on behaviour management (see e.g. Gundlach, 2021). However, training alone will not solve the problem. To use the earlier example, no matter how well-trained a teacher is in behaviour management, this will not prevent students from bringing knives into school.

One way to ensure a student does not bring a knife to school, or commit any other unsafe, offensive, or disruptive behaviour, is to suspend or permanently exclude them from that school. When necessary, this is an essential tool at the disposal of principals. Few would argue that suspensions and exclusions should be used frivolously or as a first resort. Instead, they should be used when the student in question poses a significant risk to the safety or learning of other students. Even then, most would agree that alternative provision would need to be made for the suspended or excluded student’s continuing education.

Nevertheless, schools are subjected to a perpetual campaign to reduce or even eliminate school exclusions. Campaigners tend to argue that students who are suspended or excluded from school suffer worse educational and employment outcomes and more contact with the criminal justice system than those who are not (Graham, 2018; Edwards, 2019). However, the implication that suspensions and exclusions *cause* these other negative outcomes is a good example of confusing correlation with causation. Behaviour that causes a student to be subjected to one of these serious consequences in school is also likely to cause negative consequences in wider society. This is a far more plausible explanation than the idea that suspensions and exclusions are the root cause.

Politicians have proved repeatedly susceptible to such campaigns (see e.g. Ashman, 2020a) and so we tend to repeat a cycle where there is top-down pressure to reduce or eliminate suspensions and exclusions, followed by attempts by schools to artificially meet these targets, an uptick in dangerous incidents, some of which make the media, and then a final stage when politicians change tack and the pressure to reduce suspensions and exclusions is relaxed (see e.g. Cook, 2018).

When I have raised these issues in blog posts and newspaper articles, I have been quickly drawn into a discussion about children with a disability. To those unfamiliar with these debates, behaviour and disability may seem like strange issues to link. However, some neurological disabilities and disorders can manifest in behaviour that schools find challenging to deal with. Disability advocates rightly highlight the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) and the obligation they impose on schools to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to accommodate students with a disability.

However, it is also important to highlight that the Standards state that there ‘is no requirement to make unreasonable adjustments’ and go on to explain that:

“In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable [several factors] are considered, including any effect of the proposed adjustment on anyone else affected, including the education provider, staff and other students, and the costs and benefits of making the adjustment.”

This statement is less well publicised.

Campaigners against suspensions and exclusions will point to the over representation of young people with disabilities in suspension and exclusion statistics and imply this is a result of bias. However, once we understand that some disabilities affect behaviour, this seems less surprising. It is a fallacy to assume all disparities are necessarily evidence of bias.

It is important to note how the requirement to make reasonable adjustments is enacted in schools. It is perceived to be an extension of the idea of ‘differentiation’. This is the practice of tailoring teaching and learning tasks to meet the different needs of a variety of students. Depending on how this is interpreted, differentiation can imply lots of additional work for teachers.

All teachers differentiate to some degree. For instance, they may give additional instruction to a struggling student or group of students while the rest of the class work independently. However, differentiation can also mean dividing the class up into different groups and setting them different tasks. This may sound like it will better meet students’ needs but in addition to the extra workload it imposes on teachers, it creates other issues. If a teacher divides a class into five groups for a one-hour lesson, then that implies a maximum of only 12 minutes of teaching per group. It can also exacerbate rather than reduce classroom behaviour problems because the groups of students not currently being taught by the teacher may become distracted.

It is perhaps for these reasons that despite the enduring popularity of the practice and the fact that it is written into The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2022), there is no strong body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of differentiation (see Ashman 2020b).

One approach to differentiation that is often advocated by education academics is known as ‘Universal Design for Learning’ (see e.g. Graham & Cologon, 2016) and yet its effectiveness in raising academic outcomes has not been demonstrated (Capp, 2017). The lack of evidence of effectiveness has led one academic to note the similarities between Universal Design for Learning the widely debunked theory that students possess different ‘learning styles’ that need to be accommodated in the classroom if we wish to maximise their achievement (Boysen, 2021).

Nevertheless, at the time of writing, the New South Wales Education Department website claims:

“Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to help teachers design teaching and learning that supports all students. Instructional methods, when planned and implemented intentionally, can help every student to succeed. UDL helps teachers navigate, create and adjust resources that are inclusive while meeting our legal obligations under the Disability Standards for Education (2005).”

Source: <https://bit.ly/3S3BHR0>

It is worth highlighting that planning according to the principles of Universal Design for Learning requires teachers to tailor lessons to different groups of students and their perceived needs – a time-intensive and resource-intensive process.

It is also critical to stress that these are responses to *perceived* needs. It would be hard to pinpoint the evidence that any specific differentiation strategy is more effective for the students concerned than whole-class teaching. Such strategies could even be detrimental if they lower expectations. In practice, even the kinds of adjustments teachers make for students with a disability – adjustments that come with their own significant bureaucracy around recording and reporting – do not have to be based on a solid body of empirical evidence. Some practices that *do* rest on empirical evidence, such as setting up the classroom environment to control the antecedents of disruptive behaviour (Parsonson, 2012), are not specific to individual students and so cannot be counted as adjustments, even if they have a strong positive effect on students with disabilities and disorders.

Those who frequent education faculties and teacher professional development sessions for long enough will inevitably encounter the common mantra that ‘all behaviour is communication’ (see e.g. Rose, 2014). This can be classed as what the philosopher Daniel Dennett terms a ‘deepity’. A deepity is a statement that can be read in two different ways. The first is true but trivial. The second reading is far more significant but false. The truth of the trivial meaning then gives weight to the false one. In

effect, you can use a deepity to smuggle in an untruth. Dennett gives the example, ‘love is just a word’.

On one level, all behaviour *is* communication. All behaviour potentially provides information about an individual and their state of mind, but in this sense, it is a trivial statement. Everything we ever do is ‘communication’ by this reading. However, the idea that all behaviour is an attempt by a student to communicate that their educational needs are not being met is clearly false. And yet this is the way the phrase is often interpreted.

Approaches of this kind lead to guilt and shame among teachers. Teachers do not want to admit that they are facing out-of-control student behaviour because this is seen to reflect badly on them – it suggests they are failing to meet their students’ needs in some way. Clearly, students behave poorly for a wide range of reasons, many of which are related to life outside of school and are therefore not caused by teachers failing to meet their needs. Nevertheless, in my experience, blaming poor student behaviour on teachers is common.

The hypothesis appears to be that if only teachers better understood students’ reasons for behaving disruptively, a miracle would happen, and the problem would resolve itself. Often, teachers understand the reasons behind student behaviours only too well and probably a lot better than researchers who seldom visit their classrooms. Yet, even if circumstances are such that a child should not be blamed for behaviour that negatively impacts others, that behaviour still needs to be managed to allow other students to learn and to enable a safe environment for students and teachers.

When coupled with a culture that effectively prevents teachers in government schools from speaking freely about the challenges they face, it is easy to understand why the issue of student behaviour is often left unmentioned or is approached obliquely.

Would you want to work in a role where you risked abuse, your efforts at doing your job were frequently disrupted and yet this problem was either ignored or blamed on you?

Which leads to a final couple of questions and a recommendation. The first question is why the education system has developed in this way. Effectively, it has adopted a ‘*Greatest Love of All*’ view of childhood. Instead of being born with human failings, children are born saints, corrupted only by contact with the adult world. We can trace this romantic and implausible view back through generations of educational philosophers, at least as far as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1762 novel, *Emile, or On Education*.

However, this answer is less interesting than the answer to the second question of why this philosophy persists. It is easy to understand why performatively believing exclusively nice things about young people would be an attractive option, but how has it endured in the face of reality? The answer is structural. Other major professions – perhaps we should call them ‘true’ professions – largely govern themselves. Lawyers run the law profession. Engineers run the engineering profession. Medics run the medical profession. In education, the relevant university education departments and government bureaucracies are controlled by people who, if they ever taught at all, no longer do. They do not need to consider the negative consequences of their beliefs because they do not face them daily.

Teachers, on the other hand, are those who are tasked with teaching maths to a group of Year 8 students on a wet Thursday afternoon. This generates a more pragmatic perspective.

Due to the lack of interest in the topic of behaviour management from education academics, I would like to see Australian governments take the lead and survey students and teachers about behaviour in Australian schools. Such a survey would be anonymous at the individual level – so that teachers and students could speak freely – but results would be aggregated at the school level. Ideally, this would be a national project with the survey coinciding with the collection of NAPLAN data and the results

made accessible through the MySchool website. However, a good start would be for a state or territory to introduce a pilot. This way, we would have transparent data that would allow us to track the problem over time and draw inferences about the effectiveness of different school policies.

Would a survey alone fix the problem? Australia's experience with NAPLAN demonstrates that the presence of data is not enough to cause schools to adopt evidence-based practices and instead tends to generate a lot of controversy about whether we should be collecting the data at all. However, it would be a start. It would provide clarity. Before we can fix a problem, it helps to have an accurate picture of it.

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