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AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR FLEXIBLE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee inquiry into "The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms"

March 2023

The Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this country, and their connection to land, water and community. We acknowledge that these lands have always been places of education and we pay our respect to them, their cultures and customs, and to Elders past, and present, and we acknowledge the emerging young people, who play a significant role in the community of Flexible and Inclusive Education Programs.

Education is the belief in possibilities. It is a belief about knowledge systems. It is a belief in the capacities of ordinary humans. We as educators must refuse to believe that anything in human nature and in various situations condemns humans to poverty, dependency, weakness, and ignorance. We must reject the idea that youth are confined to situations of fate, such as being born into a particular class, gender, or race. We must believe that teachers/youth workers and students can confront and defeat the forces that prevent students from living more fully and more freely. Every school is a site of reproduction or a site of change. In other words, education can be liberating, or it can domesticate and maintain domination. (Battiste, 2013).

Introduction:

The Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education (AAFIE) is the home for all educators, researchers, and policy makers with a shared commitment to providing successful educational opportunities and pathways for young people who have experienced barriers to completing school education. AAFIE supports the Flexible and Inclusive sector who support young people to learn and success.

We believe that all young people, regardless of postcode, have equal access to inclusive, positive future focused educational opportunities, specific to their needs.

AAFIEs activities focus on promoting the diverse work of professionals and young people who engage, work in and alongside the Flexible and Inclusive education settings across Australia. With the support of a knowledgeable, experienced, and passionate membership, AAFIE advocates, collaborates and influences education in Australia.

Our aim is to provide agency, voice and identity for young people and professionals within the Flexible and Inclusive Australian educational landscape.

AAFIE understands that Flexible and Inclusive Learning Programs come in many shapes and forms, but they have in common a desire to change the way schooling is provided to better suit young people for whom traditional schooling approaches have not worked well.

AAFIE welcomes to opportunity to respond to the Australian Government Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee inquiry into "the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school Classrooms" (the inquiry). We also acknowledge our member contributions to this submission.

AAFIE in this submission offers the following response to the discourse of 'disruption' in Australian classrooms by sharing learnt experiences and offering practice alternatives currently embedded within the Flexible and Inclusive Education sector that have shown to be effective in managing diverse cohorts and complex behaviours for some of the most disenfranchised students in Australia.

AAFIEs engagement with its membership demonstrated several important considerations regarding 'disruption'. We not that we received only a moderate response (less than 50%

agreement) to the general statement that there is 'increasing disruption in Australian classrooms', we did receive significant agreement when identifying the circumstances that may contribute to disruption in Australian classrooms, including:

- Students affected by trauma.
- Student: teacher ratio is too high (too many students per teacher).

- Lack of allied professional staff in the classroom and school.

Similarity, our membership strongly agreed with a range of the most useful practices that help reduce disruption in Australian school classrooms:

- Additional youth work or social work staff in the classroom to support students who have difficulty regulating.
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Flexible Learning approach:

To provide practical support, it is common for flexible learning programs to employ not only teachers but also staff with a community or social work background (te Riele, 2014).

Having not only teachers, but also youth workers, tradespeople and/or Indigenous workers, is a common and effective feature of flexible learning programs. Drawing on the complementary strengths of each staff member is useful.

"It's about skilling teachers up about welfare and youth work and it's about skilling youth workers up about education and teaching and trying to get on the same page – that we're working towards common outcomes from different professional backgrounds. (James, staff, SKYS, cited by te Riele, 2014, p. 31).

Further practices identified by our membership that help reduce disruption in Australian school classrooms:

- Professional learning in trauma-informed practice for classroom teachers
- Professional learning in trauma-informed practice for non-teaching school staff
- Professional learning in restorative justice
- Professional learning in de-escalation

Flexible Learning approach:

Flexible and Inclusive education offers a challenge to the dominant education paradigm and acts as a lighthouse of practice while paving the way of rethinking what educational inclusivity and equity can look and feel like.

As such, when addressing perceived disruption in the classroom, what these programs can offer is paradigm shift, in which a fundamental repositioning of young people and adults in the educational landscape occurs. What we witness in these spaces, is an educational landscape that adapts to support the student rather than the student being required to adapt to the system.

What we know of Flexible and Inclusive education programs is that they are committed to delivering a model of education that blends wellbeing and trauma informed practice, academic development and social development within a social justice framework, culminating in a positive and accredited holistic education journey for a diverse range of young people (Vadeboncoeur & Murray, 2013).

Pastoral care within the programs is a key ingredient of support for living, focussing on aspects such as "personal development, self-belief, well-being" (NETschool, vignette, cited by te Riele, 2014, p. 58)) and resilience building (BSL Frankston High Street Centre CVCAL, vignette, cited by te Riele, 2014, p. 58)

The development of educational responses in this space has been profound and has resulted in many requests from communities seeking innovative responses for young people they see as being lost to the system along with the negative community and individual outcomes this alienation brings.

The relational space created within flexible and alternative programs is an intentional effort to create space that offers students a safe place to reorganize their futures and deal with an often-traumatised past with targeted and evidenced support. (Vadeboncoeur & Murray, 2013).

And finally, practices identified beyond the classroom or school:

- Interagency collaboration to share information to inform catering to student needs.
- Interagency collaboration to align support programs for students.

<u>Flexible Learning approach:</u>

Flexible learning programs work because they look beyond perceived inappropriate behaviour or lack of aspiration as key reasons for disengagement and early school leaving (for example, see Archambault et al 2009, cited by te Riele 2014) to explore and address broader societal obstacles to young people's educational outcomes such as poverty, poor housing, ill-health and racism. This strategy requires involvement of the community beyond the school grounds: "Successful programs tap into the variety of resources around them to deliver positive outcomes and nuanced pathways" (Davies, Lamb and Doecke, 2011, p.41 cited by te Riele, 2014, p. 30).

At best, partnerships are not only a matter of accessing resources, but a genuine "local community-based collaborative approach" (Hayes, 2012, p.646 cited by te Riele, 2014, p. 30) that serves both young people and their community. An exemplar is practice informed by an Indigenous epistemology of relationality "where community, kinship and family networks are at the centre of all relations" (Keddie 2014, p.57, cited by te Riele, 2014, p.31). This is of benefit for making connections and recognising diversity among Indigenous students and enables "learning through (as well as learning about) Indigenous culture" (p.57, cited by te Riele 2014. P.31).

AAFIE accepts that the Flexible and Inclusive Education sector operates with notable points of difference from traditional schooling, thus offering a direct comparison of 'disruption' in an alternative classroom to a mainstream classroom is not a productive exercise. However, educators from across sectors can see how the world is changing, and with it the needs of their students. This is evident not only in so much of what is seen in classrooms daily but also in the numerous studies related to engagement or lack thereof in learning.

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute this this inquiry. We note our position as the Australian Peak for Flexible and Inclusive Education and have welcomed the opportunity to share some of the practice imperatives that directly relate to the way we deliver education and learning as a stakeholder in the diverse ecology of education in Australia.

References

Battiste, M. (2013). Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit. Canada: Purich Publishing Ltd.

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