“The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms”

Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee

Submission

Rebuilding the pathway to attaining and sustaining high levels of student engagement and minimal levels of classroom disruption

March 2023

Mr John Corrigan, Director, Group 8 Education and Dr Mark Merry, Principal, Yarra Valley Grammar

Introduction

Dr Mark Merry has over 40 years of experience in the educational field.

Mark was educated at Whitefriars College Donvale and began his teaching career in 1985. He taught History and Legal Studies and has lectured in Educational Psychology and Classroom Management at the University of Tasmania. He holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Victoria College, a Masters in Educational Studies from Monash University and a Doctorate in Education from Latrobe University.

Mark spent nine years as Deputy Principal in two schools before becoming Principal of Marcellin College in 2001 and Principal of Yarra Valley Grammar in 2009. Mark was Chair of the Associated Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) in Victoria from 2009 – 2011 and is the immediate past National Chair of AHISA. Mark has been a Director in the Associated Grammar Schools of Victoria since 2001.

John Corrigan has over twenty years of experience investigating what makes 'enlightened teachers' so effective and providing a range of services to schools including coaching and coaching training for school leaders, whole of school coaching processes to improve teacher practice and various forms of feedback including student feedback to individual teachers by class and, typically, across a whole school.

John has a degree in Mathematics from Cambridge University (UK) and an MBA from INSEAD (France). He has held several senior leadership positions in the corporate world both in Europe and Australia before focusing on education. John is the author of six books related to education:

- A World Fit for Children (2005)
- The Success Zone (2009) with Andrew Mowat and Doug Long
- Optimising Time, Attention and Energy (2016)
- Red Brain Blue Brain (2019)
- Student Feedback (2019)
- Why We Teach (2020)

Joint publications:

Corrigan J. and Merry M. (2022) *Principal Leadership in a Time of Change.* Front. Educ. 7:897620. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2022.897620

Corrigan, J. and Merry, M. (2023A). *Constructive Mutualism: Teaching 21st Century Skills in 21st Century Classrooms* (in peer review) Frontiers in Education.

Corrigan, J. and Merry, M. (2023B). *Constructive Mutualism: Providing psychological safety to students to achieve high levels of student engagement* (in preparation).

Rebuilding the pathway to attaining and sustaining high levels of student engagement and minimal levels of classroom disruption

1. Background

For fifty years the education sector has been trying to break away from the Behaviourist paradigm (Freiberg & Brophy, 1999), where responsibility for classroom management and enforcement of rules relies solely with the teacher. This traditional classroom management technique, when in full force delivered high levels of student engagement albeit with poor quality of attention. As the learning required at the time was largely rote, other forms of memorisation and procedural repetition this was not a major failing. Gradually, the use of reward and punishment, the basis for this paradigm, has weakened, especially, the punishment side which has led to a drop in the time and quality of attention which is achievable from students via these means and a subsequent increase in disruptions evidenced in many Australian schools. This has now reached crisis proportions.

> *"In Australia, many students are consistently disengaged in class: as many as 40 per cent are unproductive in a given year. The main problem is not aggressive and anti-social behaviour. More prevalent and stressful for teachers are minor disruptions, such as students talking back. Nor is it just about noise: nearly one in four students are compliant but quietly disengaged. We do not know exactly what causes students in Australia to disengage."* (Goss & Sonnemann, 2017)

To move forward as a society, we need young people to consent to give their teachers high quality attention with minimal disruptions if they are to develop the critical skills for the twenty-first century such as, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication and character qualities such as initiative, adaptability, persistence and curiosity.

It is simply not possible to achieve this type of student attention and lack of disruption within the existing Behaviourist paradigm which is so weakened and outmoded that we have arrived at the position of having large subsections of students disengaged from their learning and becoming increasingly disruptive.

Fortunately, a small minority of teachers are already operating from within the "Constructive Mutualist" paradigm and have their students willingly doing their best work and self-regulating to avoid disruptions. Thus, we have exemplars and a starting point from which to attain and sustain high levels of student engagement associated with high levels of quality attention.

2. Behaviourism versus Constructive Mutualism

Behaviourism is a paradigm, based on the underlying pleasure/pain principle, which is operationalised using reward and punishment, and which shapes every aspect of how we see the world and how we behave in it. We have ongoing behaviours that were instilled in us before we were even aware that there were other choices. This paradigm has been operational in education since state compulsory schooling was first introduced in the early part of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the fifty-year journey that the education sector has been on has taken us to the very, weakened edge of this paradigm. It is now time to consider methods more attuned to the realities of the twenty-first century classroom and more attuned to the mores expected by our students.

Constructive Mutualism is a different paradigm based on the underlying 'teacherly authority' principle - a unique human capability (Tomasello, 1999) - and operationalised through the provision of psychological (and physical) safety. That is, when a teacher provides psychological safety to a child the child's response is to pay attention to the teacher and to wherever the teacher directs their attention (the teacherly authority principle). The behaviour we see in the child is a willingness to do their best work and to self-regulate to avoid any disruptions (so as not to put the relationship at risk). In short, under this paradigm we have a shared responsibility for the conduct of the class and engaged students offering high quality attention.

> *Psychological safety is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety … they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed. They know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something. (Edmondson, 2018)*

There is a large body of research (Edmondson 2018) dating from 1999 that shows that providing psychological safety leads to better engagement, better learning and better performance in general for both individuals and

teams. This research establishes the effect of providing psychological safety but has little to say on how to provide it.

A small minority (about 5%) of teachers have always provided psychological safety and successful adults on average will have known 1 to 3 such teachers during their own schooling. These teachers are likely clearly remembered and in many cases were instrumental in the adult becoming who they are today. As Corrigan has noted (Corrigan, 2020), such teachers know they are different but cannot explain what they are doing that makes them so. Of course, this makes sense, they are operating from a different paradigm.

> *Such a teacher described a recent experience of walking into a year 7 class for his next lesson just as the previous teacher was finishing up. He recounted that as soon as he walked into the classroom students who were in the wrong seats jumped up and moved to their correct places, others adjusted their uniforms to the prescribed standard, all readied themselves for his lesson. The outgoing teacher suddenly burst out angrily "why do you do this (be orderly, be respectful) for him and not for me?" and walked out of the class. The teacher went on to say that he had never been able to explain what he was doing that caused students to respond in this way to him.*
>
> *Further in the conversation the same teacher described a class where two boys were not as engaged as he would normally expect. As he was reflecting on this some of the girls said to him "you know, sir, this is the only class where these boys do any work at all." He then asked the boys why they would work in his class and not in anyone else's and they both replied, "because in this class we feel safe". (Private conversation with Corrigan, teacher details available on request).*

In *Constructive Mutualism: Teaching 21st Century Skills in 21st Century Classrooms* (Corrigan and Merry, 2023A - currently under peer review for publication in Frontiers in Education), based on a multi-school survey of teachers and students, we show that psychological safety is overwhelmingly the most important factor for students (and teachers) in terms of their school life. We also show that although most teachers (78%) believe they are providing such safety to all their students all the time, only a minority of students (20%) experience that.

Thus, both teachers and students recognise the overwhelming importance of psychological safety, yet most teachers do not know how to provide it. A further paper in preparation (Corrigan and Merry, 2023B) lays out how psychological safety is provided by a teacher and the key steps are summarised below.

The **Constructive Mutualist** paradigm offers a pathway to attain and sustain high levels of student engagement with high quality attention and minimal disruptions, we have exemplars who seem to be homogeneously spread throughout our schools and below we show what is it that these teachers are doing i.e., the steps that are both learnable and teachable to provide psychological safety to students in the systematic way necessary to transform levels of student engagement and reduce disruptions.

3. How psychological safety is provided by a teacher

It is well understood that a newborn baby needs to be psychologically and physically safe to grow and develop healthily. This environment is provided by parental love, further we can call this love "unfeigned love" meaning that the love is provided to ensure the newborn experiences the full measure of safety and is not related to the newborn's behaviour in any way or to some other agenda that the parent has.

We can then describe the Behaviourist paradigm as offering "conditional love" – "if you do this, I will be kind to you, if you don't do this then I will punish you." This has been effective for a long time but is no longer seen as such today. In its place we have seen the emergence of "unconditional love" – "Whatever you do I will continue to be kind to you." McKee (1986) provides a good explanation of why conditional and unconditional love are both still within the Behaviourist paradigm, those who provide unconditional love:

> *They want children to comply to such behaviors as being independent, creative, freed from a nagging conscience, open to and having a sense of awareness of their own feelings, independent from institutions, free from binding rules and preconditions that stifle growth, etc. So, if both conditional and unconditional love are only extremes on how we manipulate the environment, then perhaps this dichotomization of love will turn out to be no love at all. Perhaps to take children's behavior to be the result of either extreme of the dichotomy is only a variation of feigned love. (McKee, 1986)*

More pointedly,

> *"Make love (the reinforcer) a condition of behavior (child compliance)" vs. "Give love unconditionally, for then the child will behave appropriately and congruently." Both perceptions see a causal, psychologistic relationship between what the parent does and how the child behaves. (McKee, 1986)*

Many teachers today would say that they are providing unconditional love to their students, they are unfailingly kind and are somewhat mystified why students are disengaged or disruptive. The reason is that neither conditional nor unconditional love provides a child with psychological safety, their number one priority.

We thus return to unfeigned love which is focused not on the child's behaviour but solely on providing the necessary level of safety and triggering the teacherly authority response – the child agrees to pay full attention to the parent or teacher who is providing this level of safety and avoid any disruption.

So how is this done?

We can start from the position of unconditional love, the extreme boundary of Behaviourism – in the sense that this love is passive, we are not trying actively to shape behaviour and then we need to add three further steps to the point where the child realises: "Here is someone I should pay full attention to". We have called these steps: **Invested**, **Mentoring** and **Learning**. The first is the **Invested Teacher**.

4. The Invested Teacher

The invested teacher is the teacher who looks at a child and sees the child, unfiltered by any hang ups or triggers that the teacher may have acquired as they have grown up. This means not taking a dislike to a child, which in practice is some feature of the child triggers a negative emotion in the teacher who interprets it as dislike, of course the child is not responsible for this response. This means not being resentful of a child, because they have a more privileged life than we had, for example, or because they have a particular skill or talent which we wished we had. It means not being dismissive of a child because they do not know how to behave properly, or they cannot grasp simple ideas, or how they dress, or how they hold themselves.

The invested teacher is not resentful, jealous, indifferent, dismissive, superior nor inferior, not boastful, malicious, nor easily provoked. The invested teacher sees each child as subject with a rich interior life and potential for growth rather than as an object – a task to be completed or a problem to be solved by the teacher.

The invested teacher is as happy for the child's success as if it were their own. Happy that they have advantages the teacher never had, happy for the simple things that make the child joyful. In short, the teacher is fully invested in the child, as child, as subject not object, and all the potential and joy that comes with that.

This step requires the teacher to attain a degree of self-awareness, to look at a child and ask themselves, "why do I not love this child as much as some others? What must I change in myself so that I can love them fully as much?" This is not a trivial step and takes some time but fortunately is progressive, we can extinguish triggers little by little increasing the range of children in whom we can be fully invested.

This step moves the passivity of unconditional love towards engagement and then the full activity of unfeigned love can be accessed.

5. The Mentoring Teacher

Once a teacher is fully invested, she can begin to recognise that children are 'stuck' in many ways. 'Stuck' here means that the child has a perception – of their work, themselves, the world they are in – which is poorly formed or incorrect. This misperception makes them feel threatened, ill at ease and unsafe. Some examples might be, that they are unable to do their classwork and believe that they are just not good enough, the belief that adults are not to be trusted, low self-esteem making them prone to being bullied, not clear on where their talents lie, anxious about what will happen to me if I am so useless, and so on. 'Stuckness' can also be in the other direction, so to speak, too confident, unwilling to try as things come easily, passivity rather than engagement with learning, and so on.

The mentoring teacher sees where each child is currently stuck and helps them to re-frame their perceptions so that a way forward to a better, safer state becomes apparent to the child and the child moves forward. This is identical to what a good cognitive coach will do with an adult, help them to have an "aha!" moment – a re-

framing of their perceptions – and an opportunity to act differently going forward to achieve a better outcome or future state. The fact that cognitive coaching has spread widely in education is another indicator that we are close to being able to break out of the Behaviourist paradigm, little by little adults are developing the skills.

6. The Learning Teacher

The learning teacher takes in all that they experience with striving to be fully invested and with helping children to get unstuck and uses these experiences to change their world view. This requires the capacity for active open-mindedness, to be reflective and ground their world view in the reality of their students. Thus, they broaden the appreciation and compassion they have for their students, and they increase their skill in helping students to re-frame their misperceptions and misconceptions, to change their faulty ways of thinking and feeling and to develop and grow. Their capacity for unfeigned love grows deeper and stronger.

The learning teacher becomes increasingly intuitive in how they respond to children and children, in turn, only need one or a couple of interactions to know that this is a teacher they should be paying attention to – this is a teacher who will keep them safe and help them to feel increasingly safer over time - and they enter into a relationship of teacherly authority which is expressed by willingly doing their best work and self-regulating to avoid disruptions. In essence, Behaviourism is predicated upon the teacher changing the student's behaviour. Constructive Mutualism is more about the teacher changing their own.

7. Conclusions

Education has reached a tipping point. The Behaviourist paradigm is no longer adequate to shape behaviour and attention in the ways that are needed for young people to acquire the skills to face up to an uncertain future. After a fifty-year journey we have reached the very edge of this paradigm and are poised to breakout into the Constructive Mutualist paradigm which is able to deliver high levels of quality student engagement and low levels of disruption. A small minority of teachers operate in this paradigm already (and have done so for a long time) so we know that the outcomes we seek can be reliably achieved. In addition, there is a substantial body of research supporting the importance of providing psychological safety to enhance engagement, learning and performance.

Corrigan and Merry's latest research (currently under peer review) establishes that psychological safety is the most important factor in school life for both students and teachers and that, despite most teachers believing they are providing it, they are not doing so to adequate levels.

Corrigan and Merry then propose (in a paper in preparation) that the key to the provision of psychological safety is the use of unfeigned love that goes beyond the conditional and unconditional forms of love that are within the Behaviourist paradigm. The steps that operationalise unfeigned love can now be laid out and are both learnable and therefore teachable.

Making the shift to the Constructive Mutualist paradigm has the potential to resolve problems of low student engagement and unacceptable levels of classroom disruption.

A teaching profession which embraced this change would see a progressive increase in their status and earnings as the improvements in outcomes ripple through society.

John Corrigan, Director, Group 8 Education and Dr Mark Merry, Principal, Yarra Valley Grammar

March 2023

References

Corrigan, J. (2020). *Why We Teach*. Sydney, NSW: Castleflag Pty Ltd.

Corrigan, J. and Merry, M. (2023A). *Constructive Mutualism: Teaching 21st Century Skills in 21st Century Classrooms* (in peer review) Frontiers in Education.

Corrigan, J. and Merry, M. (2023B). *Constructive Mutualism: Providing psychological safety to students to achieve high levels of student engagement* (in preparation).

Edmondson, A. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Freiberg, H. J., & Brophy, J. E. (1999). *Beyond behaviorism: changing the classroom management paradigm*. Boston, Allyn and Bacon.

Goss, P. & Sonnemann, J., (authors) & Grattan Institute, (issuing body) (2017), *Engaging students: creating classrooms that improve learning*, Grattan Institute, Carlton.

McKee, T. R. (1986) "*Love Unconditional or Love Unfeigned: Justice and Mercy in Human Development*," Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy: Vol. 12: No. 2, Article 4. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol12/iss2/4

Tomasello, M. (1999). *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.