

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

FROM Transforming Education Australasia, TEA, 2023

Transforming Education Australasia (TEA) wishes to respond to the Terms of Reference for the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee by placing emphasis on questioning the central role of disruption itself and by looking more deeply at the perceived or actual disruption.

We, Transforming Education Australasia (TEA), are an umbrella group whose purpose is to encourage conversations about ways of doing education in Australia. We embrace learner-centred, democratic, progressive and alternative education throughout Australasia. Our group currently includes representatives of Montessori Australia (MA), Steiner Education Australia (SEA), Australasian Democratic Education Community (ADEC), Home Education Australia, Future Schools, and others.

The key points we make in this submission relate to:

- Concerns around the reporting of data to lead to conclusions as outlined in (e) the loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms; and potentially (a) the declining ranking of Australia in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) disciplinary climate index, making Australian classrooms amongst the world’s most disorderly;

- The focus on teachers, and implied quality, in the Terms of Reference , particularly:
 - (b) the impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention;
 - (c) teachers’ views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them;
 - (d) the robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms; and
 - (e) the loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms;

- Presenting an alternative response to the narrowed focus on disruption as the cause for stagnation and declining results across fundamental disciplines as tested through NAPLAN (g)the stagnant and declining results across fundamental disciplines as tested

through National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) attributing to poorer school-leaving results and post-school attainment;

Key questions arise out of the PISA 2018 results¹ and the reported increased disruption in Australian schools and the claimed effect on learning and education. The terms of reference suggest that the OECD and PISA criteria reflect that Australian school standards are stagnating or declining over time with emphatic consideration of the problem as being disruption in classrooms. Table III.B1.3.1² presents almost one third of students as stating that in every or most lessons, students do not listen to the teacher or there is noise and disorder. About one in four students reported that, in every or most lessons, they start working a long time after the lesson begins or the teacher waits a long time for students to quiet down. This same section notes “Interestingly, fewer than one in five students reported that students cannot work well in every or most language-of-instruction lessons, which suggests that, at least from the students’ perspective, these disciplinary problems do not always interfere with their learning.” We see it as important to reflect on the actual extent to which disruptions are happening and with what impact upon declining performance in PISA assessments and NAPLAN in Australian schools. It would seem worthwhile to explore any other factors which may be at play.

Is there an intention for students to be included in any investigation and analysis of disruptions other than the questions they were asked as part of PISA? Are their lived experiences, views, opinions, not only being consulted and listened to, but believed? Is disruptive behaviour in language of instruction lessons the main cause of declining performance in PISA assessments and Naplan in Australian schools? It may also be possible that a focus on assessment and its effect on relationships between teachers and students is the source of disruptive behaviour. We recommend a broader examination of possible causes of disruptive behaviour and their impacts on PISA scores.

The focus on teachers, and the implied quality of teaching are noted in the Terms of Reference [particularly (b)-(e)]. TEA recognises the crucial role that teachers play in schools and learning and that they have been under increasing stress for many years from varied directions. We welcome changes which enable them to work as effective professionals. Our concern is that the data addresses only academic outcomes. This does not seem to match the statement in *What School Life Means for Students’ Lives, Vol III (2018)*, which reports on the physical and emotional health of the students and the indicators of student well-being and how these are related to the school climate. We would like to see equal weight and attention to all the issues facing students and young people as well as their teachers.

We are aware that there is a surge of interest in our schools, shown by increases in homeschooling numbers as well as enrolments in alternative schools which reflect parents and children are longing and looking for alternatives. In Queensland, from 2018 to 2022

¹ OECD (2019) PISA 2018 Results Combined Executive Summaries I, II and III

² *What School life means for Students’ Lives, Vol 111*

registrations in home schooling primary levels, enrolments grew by 2,810, 137.1% and in secondary year levels by 2,429, 204.5%. In NSW from 2017 there was an increase of 4698 to 8993 in 2021.^{3 4} In other states there is a similar story. Enrolments in Montessori schools have increased almost 30% from 2009 to 2020⁵ with Steiner member schools experiencing a 38.4% increase in enrolments from 2008-2020, representing some of the largest growth in the Australian schooling sector.⁶

We advocate for a more holistic approach to learning and would like educational policy and decision-makers to consider all that happens in students' lives, outside and inside school, particularly the wellbeing of students. Achievement in academic areas is but one part of this reality. The recent Productivity Commission Report, *Review of the National School Agreement, (Dec 2022)*, acknowledged the need to promote wellbeing.

“Many children and young people struggle with poor well-being because of experiences in and outside their schools. Teachers need more support to help students to manage these issues and achieve their potential.”

TEA promotes the value of student agency as a key element in enabling the well-being of students as well as their overall performance in school. Within our representative schools this is central to philosophy and practice. TEA strongly advocates for more time for teachers to build respectful relationships with their students so that they have a full understanding of the lives of their students and that the students also understand the role of the teachers in their lives. Teachers need to be supported in their relationship-building skills. Research shows that countries that perform well in PISA, emphasise relationship building with a strong sense of knowing the student.⁷ Time is needed to develop this practice, so we believe, in line with research in the area⁸, that there needs to be reduced emphasis and administrative expectation on teachers' accountability measures which distract from this, and more time for professional opportunity to work with peers, colleagues and students in improving the culture within their classrooms and schools. TEA contends that learning, wherever it takes place, in a conventional classroom or in the myriad other ways we all learn, is diminished when the relationships among

³<https://qed.qld.gov.au/our-publications/reports/statistics/Documents/home-education-registrations.pdf>

⁴<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/c2212e83-c476-4da6-89b5-dd12b8ce8e9a/home-schooling-data-reports-relating-to-2021.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

⁵ Eacott, S. & Wainer, C. (2023) *Schooling on the margins: the problems and possibilities of Montessori schools in Australia*, Cambridge Journal of Education, DOI: 10.1080/0305764X.2023.2189228

⁶ Eacott, S and Rivera, F. Steiner 2021: *The Curation of Contemporary Education* (pg3)UNSW, Gonski Institute at SEA , Australia

⁷Aditomo, A., Köhler, C. Do student ratings provide reliable and valid information about teaching quality at the school level? Evaluating measures of science teaching in PISA 2015. *Educ Asse Eval Acc* 32, 275–310 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09328-6>. Classroom Management, Emotional Support, Adaptive Instruction, and Teacher-directed Instruction scales were found to account for meaningful differences in teaching quality between schools.

⁸ [What is School Climate and Why is it Important? - National School Climate Center](#)

the co-learners, adults and young people, breaks down. We contend that with more emphasis on being learner-centred, where students have agency, self-determination and self-discipline and a genuine caring relationship with their teachers, peers and families, when teachers are genuinely interested in their students' wellbeing, and students and teachers become mutually invested in their work, disruptive and uncooperative behaviour begins to disappear.

We recommend more discussions within school communities, including students, for a more holistic approach to the term "discipline". Students who are included in the decisions about their lives are engaged in their learning and in the life of the school and see less need for disruptive behaviour⁹

TEA encourages more meaningful processes of assessment which value the skills and expertise of the teacher to ascertain the progress of the students and more recognition of the place of self-assessment which is a key element in any sense of agency for the students and which is recommended as best practice¹⁰ In line with this, there are now many different pathways to further education and a dependence and emphasis on one pathway or recognition of achievement is potentially limiting for many students.^{11 12}

In conclusion, we are recommending a broader examination of the issue of disruption in classrooms and the myriad and complex factors that could impact upon this. These include, but are not limited to, systemic pressures on teachers, relationships, student voice and agency, student home and school life, assessment and alternative pathways to further education.

We look forward to the publication of the report which evidences these recommendations.

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⁹https://suitable-education.uk/evidence-base-for-self-directed-education/?fbclid=IwAR3YYR4pE1SAsvJF0YKOUy3QHbRxvCmQkKLRomFs-twK4vQUGejeWvEGql&_ga=2.67178898.207387842.1678838804-357863508.1678838804

¹⁰ Masters, G. N. (2013), *Reforming education assessment : imperatives, principles and challenges*, ACER,

Australian education review ; no. 57., and Stobart, G. & Eggen, T. (2012) *High-stakes testing – value, fairness and consequences*, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 19:1, 1-6, DOI: 10.1080/0969594X.2012.639191

¹¹ [Alternative pathways to higher education | myfuture](#)

¹² [More students opt for non-ATAR pathways to university \(uwa.edu.au\)](#)

