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

FROM Transforming Education Australasia, TEA, January 2023

Submissions are requested by **31 March 2023.**

Transforming Education Australasia (TEA) is an umbrella group which would like to encourage conversations about different ways of doing education in Australia. We embrace different types of education which focus on learner-centred, democratic, progressive and alternative education throughout Australasia. Our group currently includes representatives of Montessori Australia & New Zealand, Steiner Education, Democratic Education, Home Education Australia, Future Schools, Reggio Emilia and others.

are aware that there is a surge of interest in our schools, increases in homeschooling numbers, as well as different kinds of education, and other initiatives where parents and children are longing and looking for something different. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2023.2189228>) We advocate for a more holistic approach to learning and would like educational policy makers and decision-makers to focus more on all that happens in students’ lives, outside and inside school, especially the wellbeing of students and that achievement in academic areas is one part, not the only part, of this reality.

A few key questions arise out of the PISA 2018 results and the report of increased disruption in Australian schools and the effect this is claimed to be having on learning and education. We acknowledge that according to the OECD and PISA criteria, it appears that Australian school standards are stagnating or declining over time and there is now consideration that the problem lies in disruption in classrooms. According to the PISA questions (Table III.B1.3.1) in What School life means for Students Lives, Vol111, almost one third of students said 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 has to wait a long time for students to quiet down.What are the underlying causes of this if it is happening? 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.” Are disruptions happening?

Is the 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 or are there other factors at play?

TEA recognises the crucial role that teachers play in schools and learning and that they have been under increasing stress for many years from so many directions. We welcome any changes which enable them to be as effective as possible, we welcome that the first five points in the Terms of Reference concentrate on teachers. However we are concerned that there is virtually no mention of the effect on the students apart from their academic results. This does not seem to match the statement in Vol111 of Pisa 2018 Results, What School Life Means for Students’ Lives, which focuses 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 the teachers.

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. We strongly advocate 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 the students also understand the role of the teachers in their lives. Teachers need to be supported in their relationship-building skills. Time is needed for this, so we believe that there needs to be reduced emphasis and expectation on teachers about paperwork and any accountability measures which distract from this, and more time for them to work with their peers, colleagues and students in improving the culture within their classrooms and schools.

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 behaviour.

We encourage more emphasis **on different means 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. There are now **many different pathways to further education and dependence** and emphasis on one type of assessment limits the possibilities for many students.

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 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.

NOTES

(Some 82% of students in Australia above the OECD average of 74%, agreed or strongly agreed that their teacher shows enjoyment in teaching. In most countries and economies, including in Australia, students scored higher in reading when they perceived their teacher as more enthusiastic, especially when students said their teachers are interested in the subject )

What School Life Means for Students’ Lives How is the school climate in Australia? Australia Country Note PISA 2018, p 8