ISA SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO DISRUPTION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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1. KEY POINTS

- Many Independent schools use whole-school and multi-tiered approaches and implement individual student strategies to promote positive classroom climates.

- Many Independent school leaders and teachers commit to ongoing professional development to implement evidence-based strategies for minimising classroom disruption and promoting positive student behaviours.

- Classroom disruption can occur in any school. Reasons for disruptive behaviour can be complex and may relate to a diverse range of school, student and family contexts.

- Disruptive classroom environments can impact staff and student wellbeing and safety.

- Challenging student behaviour may impact teacher workplace satisfaction and teacher retention.

- Loss of instructional time due to negative classroom climates can impact student learning.

- Some students in Independent schools, including students from equity groups, may require individualised support to self-regulate behaviour to positively participate in class.

- Many Independent special assistance schools use a variety of strategies and wrap-around approaches to support students to regulate behavioural responses and develop self-management skills.

- A greater focus on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs and practicums in classroom management strategies may better prepare graduate teachers to create positive classroom climates.

2. ABOUT ISA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It includes the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents 1,209 schools and over 668,600 students, accounting for approximately 17 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the Independent school sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of

Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community.

Independent schools include:

— Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist schools

— Non-denominational Christian schools

— Islamic schools

— Jewish schools

— Montessori schools

— Rudolf Steiner schools

— Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states

— Community schools

— Indigenous community schools

— Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities

— Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other factors.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

3. INTRODUCTION

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) has prepared this submission in response to the Senate inquiry into disruption in Australian school classrooms.

This submission provides an overview of the impact of classroom disruption in the Independent school sector and the responses of the sector to support schools experiencing classroom disruption.

ISA consulted with the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) in preparing this submission.

It is every school's responsibility to provide a safe environment where students can learn and feel a sense of belonging. Independent schools promote student, staff and community wellbeing and proactively develop whole-school strategies and programs to support student learning and maximise instructional time.

Classroom disruption can occur for a range of reasons. It can impact schools at differing levels, depending on context. Reducing classroom disruption and creating positive classroom environments should be the goal of every teacher and school leader. Investigating causes for classroom disruption

and developing proactive strategies to empower teachers and support students in their learning is important. The development of school wide policies and expectations, positive behaviour programs, pastoral care programs and research informed best practice is are key priorities for many Independent schools.

A whole-school approach to classroom management and student behaviour guides teachers, students, parents and carers in understanding and acting upon individual roles and responsibilities and the development of healthy relationships.

4. IMPACT ON TEACHERS

Independent schools highly value the importance of staff and student wellbeing and promote positive and orderly environments. Despite this, there are always challenges, as there are a range of school contexts and school policies and approaches. Diversity in student cohorts, families and staff play a part in what happens in individual classrooms and school environments in Independent schools.

Disruptive classrooms and challenging student behaviours can affect the wellbeing of staff, impact instructional time and teacher workload which in turn may affect work satisfaction and, in some cases, workforce retention.

To promote positive classroom climates, many Independent schools implement whole school approaches and policies to promote positive behaviours and clearly outline school expectations of student behaviour, as well as the roles and responsibilities of staff, students and parents and carers. Many Independent schools offer extra classroom support where required, such as specialist staff, wellbeing support and teacher assistants. In addition, many teachers have access to professional development and support to continually improve classroom management practice.

However, even with whole school approaches, policies and support, in some Independent schools and contexts there may be teachers who do not feel safe in the classroom or, for many reasons, have the capacity or confidence to manage students that demonstrate significant disruptive behaviour.

Exposure to low-level disturbance (e.g., name calling, refusing instructions) through to high-level disturbance (e.g., physical violence) can place teachers' safety and mental health and wellbeing at risk.

AISs reported there may be a link between poor student self-regulation, classroom disruption and teacher retention or burnout. Further feedback from AISs also states that job satisfaction may diminish when teachers are unable to perform their role effectively if there are continual behavioural disruptions.

Some AISs noted that at times, teachers may feel guilty about the amount of time they may require to address student behaviour at the expense of student learning. Significant teacher workload may also mean a lack of time to follow up student behaviour effectively or for highly effective teachers to observe and/or mentor less experienced teachers.

As Australia is experiencing a critical teacher workforce shortage, teacher retention is critical, therefore Independent schools value a range of strategies to support teachers in managing student behaviour so that the impact of classroom disruption on teachers is lessened and student learning is maximised.

4.1 Strategies

There are a range of strategies which Independent schools may implement to support positive classroom climates. Those that are most effective make school expectations clear, have the full support of school boards and leadership and staff are well resourced and supported to implement school policy and strategy.

4.1.1 Support staff

Many Independent schools have teacher aides available for student and teacher support. This support can make a significant difference, especially when teacher aides are provided with extra training to help students regulate their behaviour and there is time for teachers and support staff to plan together. Independent schools strive to have additional support available to staff and students where needed, to promote positive classroom climates and support individual students, but this often depends on the expertise available and school resourcing.

4.1.2 Addressing the causes

All behaviour is a form of communication. In order to address the cause of disruptive behaviour it is essential to understand why a student is displaying disruptive behaviour. Knowing each student well, pre-empting and minimising behaviour triggers and seeking extra support for a student when needed, can decrease disruptive behaviours. This takes time and may require certain expertise from experienced school leaders and teachers, school counsellors, wellbeing officers, school chaplains and school psychologists. Independent schools report long waitlists for accessing external professional services, which is challenging when the high level of support required Is beyond what can reasonably be expected within a school setting.

4.1.3 Whole-school approaches

Independent school leaders who promote a whole-school evidenced-based positive behaviour approach that is consistently implemented, can provide teachers with confidence and support. Empowered teachers have a strong basis to apply effective classroom management, minimise disruptive behaviours and maximise instructional time to support student learning.

Some examples of whole-school approaches implemented by Independent schools are positive behaviour support, restorative practice and trauma-informed practice. Whole-school approaches also recognise that some students require individualised support to self-regulate and that specialised expertise can make a difference to both teachers and students.

Independent schools place great value on the development of positive relationships with parents and carers to ensure that everyone is aware of their role and responsibilities and school expectations. Healthy relationships between the school and parents and carers and a united approach to behavioural expectations can benefit all stakeholders.

4.1.4 Professional learning

AISs report that there is increased demand from Independent school leadership and teaching staff for professional development in managing student behaviour. To maintain order in the classroom, ongoing professional learning in understanding whole-school strategies and identifying individual strategies to support diverse student needs, are critical to minimise disruptive classroom behaviours, increase instructional time and empower teachers.

Some AISs reported that it is often low-level disorderly behaviours that can affect student engagement, teacher self-efficacy and teacher retention. It is therefore important that teacher expectations of student behaviour and strategies implemented are consistent, frequently reinforced and are aligned with evidence-based school policy.

Some AISs reported there is also a middle tier between whole-school and individual student approaches which may include more targeted intervention and all staff explicitly knowing what to do when student behaviour escalates. Some AISs stated that there is a substantial amount of research into classroom disruption, however this information does not always reach busy teachers.

4.1.5 Physical Environment

Many Independent schools pay attention to the school's physical environment to support positive classroom climates. Classroom size can determine teacher and student movement around the class, scope for student desk arrangements, areas for relaxation or different modes of learning and flexibility for break out spaces.

Some Independent schools have outdoor classrooms and break out rooms as alternative learning spaces. Diverse learning spaces may encourage more engagement from students and improve self-regulation.

5. INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs need to prepare graduate teachers to work effectively with students demonstrating challenging behaviours. Effectively mentoring graduate teachers and modelling from experienced teachers is largely left to individual schools to manage.

A greater focus in ITE programs and practicums on positive classroom management in diverse contexts may better prepare graduate teachers in developing positive classroom climates. AISs noted that teacher graduate preparedness for student behaviour management and classroom safety varies across the sector.

ISA supports Priority Area 2 of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan with the focus to strengthen ITE programs to ensure that graduating teachers are better prepared for the classroom.

This could be implemented by having:

— clearer guidelines for supervising teachers about their role and the expectations of practicums and offering mentoring and quality supervision to ensure that graduate teachers have a range of experiences in diverse classrooms and school contexts

— added and/or longer practicums where students can intensely focus on specialised areas such as providing adjustments and behaviour support for students with disability to gain experience in classroom management and individualising programs

— a focus on collaboration with parents and carers.

6. IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Students exhibiting disruptive behaviours can adversely affect the wellbeing and safety of other students. In addition, the loss of teacher instructional time in managing classroom disruption can affect student learning and engagement.

6.1 Academic achievement

Some students with poor self-efficacy may disengage from learning and display disruptive behaviours if they believe they are unable to manage their school work. Academic decline may lead to further disengagement, creating a negative cycle of classroom disruption. In contrast, ACER research has shown that students with higher self-efficacy performed at a higher level in reading literacy.[1] Higher performance may therefore lead to greater student engagement and less classroom disruption, creating a positive classroom climate.

6.2 Other causes for disruption

Some AISs noted there can be many causes of disruptive student behaviour. One cause may be family trauma, including parent separation, parent/carer illness and/or domestic violence.

Bullying can also be a cause of classroom disruption. This may be cyber bullying or bullying in school or outside school hours. Independent schools have bullying policies and strategies in place to support students and staff, to minimise bullying situations and promote staff and student safety.

Some students with disability may cause class disruption if there has not been appropriate attention to minimise triggers in their environment or make necessary adjustments so they can work to their best ability.

6.3 School exclusion

Evidence suggests that emotional and behavioural conditions are the strongest predictors of school exclusion and repeated exclusion.[2] School expulsion, suspension or exclusion may be a final outcome when disruptive behaviours are ongoing or significant and all other strategies, plans and support measures have been exhausted.

6.4 Equity groups

Managing classroom disruption is a challenging issue for some Independent schools and their staff. Students from equity groups may require individualised approaches to support positive classroom participation.

6.4.1 Students with disability

In 2022, over 20 per cent of enrolments at Independent schools were students with disability. There were 47 Independent special schools enrolling 3,451 students with disability. In 2022, the majority

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[1] ACER, "Reporting Australia's Results Volume II Student and School Characteristics," 2020, https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=ozpisa. p.124

[2] Kevin Reunions and Donna Cross, "Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health" (Independent Schools Australia, May 2022), https://isa.edu.au/documents/report-wellbeing-of-students-and-staff/. p.20

of students with disability in the Independent school sector were at the Supplementary level of adjustment (60,491 students with disability).[3]

Some AISs noted that when a student with disability shows disruptive behaviours, some teachers may be reluctant to address behaviours for fear of parent criticism or being open to discrimination allegations under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). AISs noted that some parents and carers of students with disability may not disclose information about the student's disability at the time of enrolment. This may mean that adjustments that should be in place to support the student may be absent, which can lead to disruptive behaviours.

Another factor that may cause teacher stress is when parents of students without disability complain that a student with disability is having an adverse impact on their child's learning. It can be a delicate balancing act to decrease tension and ensure each student is receiving equitable opportunities for learning.

6.4.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have experienced a long history of trauma. This intergenerational trauma has meant that some students can be wary of school or have negative views of education. This might affect the ability of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to cope with a negative classroom climate.

In 2022, there were 17,752 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Independent school sector (2.6 per cent of enrolments in Independent schools).

ACER interestingly found there was an average 6.8 per cent difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students who reported that in most English classes there was disruption in the classroom across a range of categories:

— Students do not listen to what the teacher says.

— There is noise and disorder.

— The teacher must wait a long time for students to quieten down.

— Students cannot work well.

— Students do not start working for a long time after the class begins.[4]

6.4.3 Disadvantaged students

A South Australian study in 2014 found that more than 60 per cent of teachers in low-SES schools reported disruption in class several times a day, compared to 10 per cent in high-SES schools. This may be related to problems at home, or the uneven distribution of experienced teachers in these locations.[5]

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[3] Department of Education, "Non-Government School Census," 2022.

[4] ACER, "Reporting Australia's Results Volume II Student and School Characteristics." p.97

[5] Peter Goss, Julie Sonnemann, and Kate Griffiths, "Engaging Students: Creating Classrooms That Improve Learning," 2017. p.11

7. AIS SUPPORT

AISs provide Independent schools with professional learning and when necessary, with individual school support in positive behaviour and whole school approaches or even with direct support to implement strategies and plans for specific students. Many AISs have consultants available to support schools and teachers.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) has developed a Positive Behaviour Support tiered framework which schools can use as a whole-school approach to review classroom routines, procedures and effective teaching practice to support positive classroom climates. ISQ also collaborates with school leadership to promote effective and consistent school policies and practices.

Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) supports Independent schools with professional development in coaching, teacher observations, strategies for working with diverse student needs and support mechanisms for staff under duress. ISV has noted that the Tutoring Learning Initiative program has been of great benefit for those Independent schools which have engaged with this program.

The Association of Independent Schools NSW (AISNSW) supports Independent schools through a structured whole-school renewal initiative focussing on a framework to create positive, engaged learning environments. AISNSW also offer online support and professional learning, individual support and school visits. Some of their initiatives include professional learning in:

— understanding functional behaviour

— analysing school-based data

— developing interventions

— understanding the escalation cycle

— developing positive classroom practices

— increasing engagement and learning for all students

— supporting teacher wellbeing

— explicitly teaching skills for learning engagement

— social and emotional learning wellbeing.

8. INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

Many Independent special assistance schools demonstrate best practice in responding to classroom disruption. Many students who attend Independent special assistance schools have exhibited significant disruptive behaviours in mainstream educational settings and disengaged from schooling.

In 2022, the Independent school sector had 96 special assistance schools (7.9 per cent of all Independent schools), catering for 13,100 students (1.9 per cent of all Independent school students). The number of special assistance schools in the Independent school sector doubled between 2014

and 2022, highlighting the need for these schools. In contrast, mainstream Independent schools, increased by 8 per cent over the same eight-year period.

Independent special assistance schools provide an alternative option to mainstream schooling to re-engage young people in education. Students may not have been enrolled in a school for a prolonged period and have a history of high absentee rates, skipping classes, not completing work or demonstrating disruptive behaviours, often resulting in suspension, expulsion or exclusion.

As students become more adept at regulating their behavioural responses and developing self-management skills, they enjoy a higher level of autonomy and resilience.

Strategies used by special assistance schools to support a positive classroom climate include:

— Wrap around care where teachers, staff and the school environment work together to support the needs of students as a team.

— Trauma informed education which creates a trauma-sensitive environment where everyone can feel safe.

— Restorative practice which is a whole-school teaching and learning approach that encourages supportive and respectful behaviour.

— Effective teaching and learning approaches such as transformative learning, inclusive education, individual learning plans, cultural competency, outreach programs and direct instruction.

9. CONCLUSION

Classroom disruption can negatively influence teacher and student wellbeing and safety. Creating a positive school environment is a priority for all Independent school leaders and staff. Whole-school approaches, policies and strategies that are implemented consistently by all staff and are communicated to the school community can promote positive student behaviour, safe school and classroom environments and foster healthy relationships.

It is also recognised that even with whole school approaches, policies and support, there can be instances when significant disruptive behaviours can impact a class, causing both student and teacher distress and poor mental health and wellbeing.

Reasons for disruptive student behaviours can be diverse and complex and individual support and approaches that may be required can impact on school resources and teacher workload.

The loss of teacher instructional time in managing classroom disruption can affect student learning and engagement, resulting in lower academic outcomes. The Independent sector therefore places great value on proactive strategies to minimise class disruption, create positive class climates and support student learning and engagement.

Many Independent schools turn to the AIS in their state or territory to access advice, professional development and policy support to implement practices that minimise classroom disruption and improve student behaviour.

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