

A WEEKLY COMMENTARY

- NEWS HIGHLIGHTS
- BACKGROUND INFORMATION
- COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS



The Price of Freedom is Eternal Vigilance

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IN THIS ISSUE

Student Performance, Behaviour and Equity in Public Schools By William Waite 51

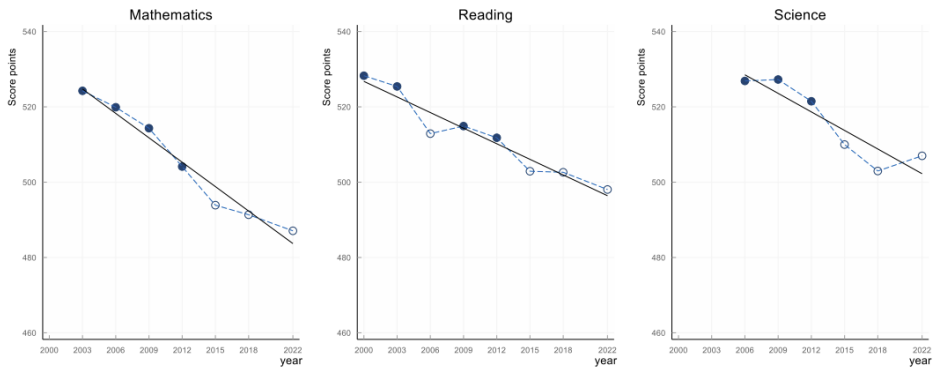
Student Performance, Behaviour and Equity in Public Schools By William Waite

The other day I was going through some things and came across my Grade 1 writing pad. It was amusing to be reminded of that little person, long gone. There are some interesting observations like, “When it rains I see ducks”, “Men are big, sometimes they work.” and “There are jumping Jigarees in space.” Besides the ‘Jigarees’ what jumped out at me was the neatness and care which had obviously gone into the writing and the pictures that accompanied each entry, a standard many high school students fail to obtain.

There is one thing on which agreement is unanimous. Education in Australia is failing. It’s a live political issue. True to form the opposition blames the government and the government, unable to disagree that the whole thing is a catastrophe, runs around saying how important young people are and throwing taxpayer money at it. Enrolment in NSW public schools is declining and teacher retention and attraction is top of the agenda. As of last year a starting teacher salary runs to six figures, more than the average beginning engineer and accountant.

Probably the most authoritative data we have on educational performance is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that consists of a series of tests in maths, reading and science. “Almost 700,000 students across 81 countries and economies participated in the last cycle of PISA (2022).” Our results from this latest round of testing conformed to the Australian trend line of the last 20 plus years.¹

Figure 1. Trends in performance in mathematics, reading and science



Note: White dots indicate mean-performance estimates that are not statistically significantly above/below PISA 2022 estimates. Black lines indicate the best-fitting trend. An interactive version of this figure is available at <https://oecdch.art/a40de1dbaf/C620>.

Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Database, Tables I.B1.5.4, I.B1.5.5 and I.B1.5.6.

Alongside the main event of academic testing PISA undertakes a survey of students' perceptions of classroom disciplinary climate. The 2018 survey is described thus:

*PISA asked students how frequently (“never or hardly ever”, “some lessons”, “most lessons”, “every lesson”) the following things happen in their language-of-instruction lessons: “Students don’t listen to what the teacher says”; “There is noise and disorder”; “The teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down”; “Students cannot work well”; and “Students don’t start working for a long time after the lesson begins”.*²

Australia does not perform well. In the 2018 disciplinary climate survey, out of 77 countries, Australian students ranked their classrooms at 70th in the OECD.³

The 2022 results on disciplinary climate were not good either. Survey results returned that in Australia:

Many students study mathematics in a disciplinary climate that is not favourable to learning: in 2022, about 25% of students in Australia reported that they cannot work well in most or all lessons (OECD average: 23%); 33% of students do not listen to what the teacher says (OECD average: 30%); 40% of students get distracted using digital devices (OECD average: 30%); and 37% get distracted by other students who are using digital devices (OECD average: 25%).

So what is the relationship between student performance and disciplinary climate? Students who describe disciplinary problems as occurring in “every lesson” experienced a 40-to-50 point drop in reading performance compared with students who reported that these problems happened “never or hardly ever” (see table below). This means that the disciplinary climate alone could explain Australia’s deterioration of student performance over the past 20 years.

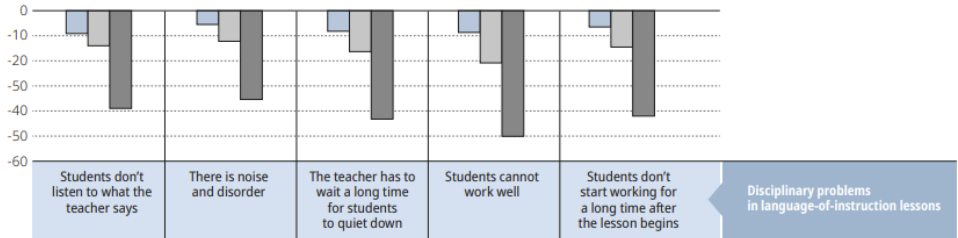
Figure III.3.3 Prevalence of disciplinary problems and reading performance

OECD average

Frequency (reference category: "never or hardly ever")

Some lessons Most lessons Every lesson

Score-point difference, compared to "never or hardly ever"



Notes: All values are statistically significant (see Annex A3).

All regression models account for students' and schools' socio-economic profile. The socio-economic profile is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS).

Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table III.B1.3.8.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888934029413>

Conspicuously absent from the public discussion about ‘what’s wrong with education’ is the perspective of the classroom teacher. So here it is. Based on my 20 years of experience the PISA results accurately reflect the reality in public school classrooms. At all times in my teaching career, across two states, a want of classroom discipline has been the most important obstacle to effective curriculum delivery. In 2020, at the school where I worked there were more than 14,000 negative incidents recorded against students. That is roughly 10% of the school population reported on per day and most of these incidents occurring in the classroom. Keep in mind that this represents a fraction of total disruptive incidents. What follows is something of a deep dive into the educational policy and legislation which has led to the toleration of student misbehaviour in schools. It’s a bit of a monster and not my usual topic, but education occupies such an important role in our society as such a large part of our children’s formative years are spent in school. I apologise in advance for the wordiness of the sources but that’s ‘Edu speak’ for you. I have tried not to indulge in it. The sources cited have all directly informed the current policy of the NSW Department of Education.

Responsible for the deterioration of discipline in the classroom is a radical shift in how education departments consider, and therefore deal with, student misbehaviour. This shift is encapsulated in the following quote from the NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools⁴, published in August 2017:

Student behaviour does not exist in isolation – it is influenced by a wide range of internal and external factors and responsibility for behaviour should not be fully located with students.

The Ombudsman’s report was heavily influenced by another paper: Report of the Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviours⁵, 2015. “Complex needs and challenging behaviours” has become how the school

community thinks about misbehaviour in schools. The Ombudsman report uses the term 68 times. The Expert panel defines it as:

Any pervasive behaviour or set of behaviours, regardless of cause (or even without any apparent or identified cause) which disrupts the capacity of the person or other persons to learn within the school environment, and requires targeted or personalised interventions.

You will see this is not so much a definition as a recommended course of action that can be condensed to something like: regardless of the cause of the behaviour, disruptive students require interventions. Curiously it will be noticed that the ‘complex needs’ part of the term cannot be made to fit into this definition, unless it is captured by ‘cause’, which it seems can simply be ignored.

While causes of behaviour may be difficult to determine the expert panel takes a firm line on what is not the cause of disruptive behaviour:

Most, if not all, students with complex needs and challenging behaviour do not ‘choose’ to become disruptive at school. Disability, social background and/or current life circumstances, including school life, influence how these students perceive and interact with the world, and it would be unfair or a mistake to believe that the problem is strictly ‘in the student.’⁶

We find this deterministic view elaborated in another report commissioned by the NSW Department of Education, and carried out by the Telethon Kids Institute entitled, Strengthening school and system capacity to implement effective interventions to support student behaviour and wellbeing in NSW public schools: An evidence review⁷. In the section on ‘Guiding Theory’, under the heading of the Individual Student we find the following:

Characteristics of the individual student such as age, sex, personality and temperament, mental and physical health and special needs status can interact with factors in the environment to influence outcomes. For instance, genetic variations in how the body responds to stress ... the body’s ability to produce certain hormones ... functional differences in the brain’s reward circuit ... Individual variations in biology will also affect the development of resilience by influencing personality and temperament.

This description of the individual considers people as quantities that change under the influence of ‘risk’ or ‘protective’ factors located in ‘layers’ of immediate to remote environments e.g. family, school, community, culture etc. This notion claims that behaviour is the inevitable result of an admixture of hormones, neural circuitry, genetic particulars etc. Not even the personality is capable of conscious development. Personal development is not generated by such non-material illusions as these, but the result of “individual variations in biology.”

It is not surprising then that this Social-ecological Systems Theory, as it is called, comes up with the following solution to support students to “develop along ‘normal’

trajectories” and “avoid disorder”:

As the opportunities for change are the interactions between the student and factors in these immediate environments, behaviour and wellbeing can be effectively supported by modifying the school environment i.e. social contexts can either attenuate or exacerbate the effect of individual characteristics on behaviour. It is not necessary to change the student or to remove them from the school environment.

It will be seen that in this conception nothing is required of the student. No appeal can be made to decency or self-restraint because these things are only the inevitable products of biological and social conditions over which the student has no control. It is the environment that must change and be changed for each student. Classroom disruption is to be tolerated until such time as the social and physical conditions can be altered to ameliorate the frustrations that are presumed to be causing the behaviour. Reference to this model can be found on the NSW Education website⁸. Once personal responsibility and choice have been ruled out as possibilities for self-improvement (or destruction), it follows that disruptive behaviour must be the result of disability or disadvantage located in the individual or his environment; ‘internal or external factors.’

Aside from omitting the conscious adaptive powers of the species as a factor in behaviour, this approach of environmental modification is impractical in the school setting. The machinery of mass education, basically tasked with teaching the essential academic tools for life in a modern, technical society cannot provide a different environment for each student in the same physical environment. Anyone who asserts that this is possible, or even desirable, is simply not aware of the realities of teaching and classroom management, and perhaps not aware of the limitations of reality generally.

It is at this point that the NSW Education Act operates causing schools to take up their legal responsibility for “mitigating educational disadvantages arising from the child’s gender or from geographic, economic, social, cultural, lingual or other causes.” And since persistent misbehaviour, as we have seen, can only indicate a disadvantage or disability of some kind these students become by default candidates for behavioural intervention.

Be assured that when it comes to disability the relevant legislation provides ample opportunity for labelling. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992, to which schools are subject, reads from point “g”¹⁰

(g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour;

and includes a disability that:

(h) presently exists; or

(i) previously existed but no longer exists; or

(j) may exist in the future (including because of a genetic predisposition to that disability); or

(k) is imputed to a person.

To avoid doubt, a **disability** that is otherwise covered by this definition includes behaviour that is a symptom or manifestation of the disability.

If we combine this absurdly broad definition with the 900 plus pages of the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) we have a formula that allows for the interpretation of all errant behaviour as being caused by mental disability.

As if this was not enough the NSW Education Department fills the gaps with the following guidance:

A disability does not need to be ‘confirmed’ for it to come within the definition in the legislation. The department uses the term ‘confirmed disabilities’ to refer to disabilities that have been confirmed using established disability criteria, which provides eligibility for targeted provisions only.

The definition also covers disabilities that presently exist, previously existed, or may exist in the future.

So an official disability confirmation is not even required (and they’re easy enough to get) before a student’s behaviour can be legitimately described as a behaviour disorder. I see this scenario playing out all the time. It is pretty common to hear teachers discuss student behaviour in terms mental health disorders which have not been diagnosed.

All this adds up to the startling fact that the insanity defence is the *default* explanation for misbehaviour in schools.

A perverse outcome of all this is that students who are misbehaving at school and might be turned around by resolute disciplinary action are being told they have a mental disorder. It is common for schools to require students to attend appointments with paediatricians where they are often pressured into taking psychoactive medication. Let’s just say that the intersection of education and psychiatry is a matter of serious concern and leave it at that.

If a reason for persistent misbehaviour in the vast category of metal disorders can’t be found we can opt for the “external factors” that influence (negative) behaviour given in the Ombudsman’s report; “difficult personal or family circumstances (including socio-economic factors, drug/alcohol use, and family breakdown)”; circumstantial descriptions that cover a large and growing proportion of the student population.

These interventions take a myriad of forms. Endless discussions with the student about the inappropriateness of the misbehaviour from all levels of staff; curriculum adjustments; frequent phone calls home and meetings with parents; the formulation of individualised behaviour and learning plans; teaching and implementing strategies to help the student manage his or her behaviour; mediation; staff and/or student

mentoring programs; the granting of exceptions to normal school routine; one on one case management by a member of staff taken off classes for this purpose; specially targeted programs; consultation with outside agencies; counselling; the bringing in of “behaviour experts” to assess the student; partial attendance schedules; voluminous incident record making; functional behaviour analysis and the list goes on. It is becoming increasingly common for misbehaving or truant students to be assigned a teacher aide full time to follow the student around all day. In a more recent development chronically misbehaving students are given a dubious “diagnosis” of disability by the school or department, and concentrated in additional classes in special education units. Here, a class of fewer than 10 students will have a dedicated teacher and aide as well as all the resources of a normal sized class. It is now widespread practice that all students are subjected to infantile lessons on how they should behave at school as a sort of prophylaxis against misbehaviour. As to the effectiveness of these interventions my experience leads me to agree with the review from the Telethon Kids Institute when it says, “most behaviour interventions implemented in schools have no or very limited evidence of effectiveness.”

Aside from the considerable expense in time and money required by these interventions, they are undertaken while disruptive students continue to attend classes. Staff and classmates are expected to endure persistent disruptions to their work while the student receives their treatment, and with no definite end in sight. I have seen this situation persist for years, and only find its end when the student is eventually ‘transitioned’ into work or some other program outside of the school. Interestingly, on entering the workforce many of these students, literally overnight, become prompt, productive, presentable and polite; apparently cured of their social and mental ills by McDonalds’ code of conduct. The egregious loss of educational opportunity suffered by a majority of conforming students barely rates a mention.

At the school level open opposition to the inclusion agenda that I have described is almost non-existent, though there is certainly a profound disquiet among teachers about the behaviour in many classrooms. As the behaviour problem worsens the ranks of the true believers in the post-disciplinary system swell to meet the demands for interventions pursuing ‘welfare’, as opposed to academic, outcomes. Dissenters, where they can be found, are looked at askance, considered relics of the age of corporal punishment and labelled as “cultural resistance.” All the while the educational opportunities of our children are wasted along with billions of tax dollars purloined by government for “education.”

The other point I would make is that I doubt that most parents view their children as dumb products of environmental circumstances or passive victims of mental, neural and hormonal conspiracy. In the main, the community whom we serve believe in personal responsibility and moral judgement and action. The criminal justice system still locates the proximate cause of behaviour in human choice and its preferable that kids learn this at school rather than by a run in with the law. It probably goes against the views of most of society this idea that people

are not responsible for their wrong-doing and it is an arrogant condescension when academics and teachers treat our children as though they are not responsible human beings. It is interesting to observe that many of the keenest proponents of these ideas in government schools send their own kids to Christian schools where the operative principle remains moral responsibility.

Providing adjustments for disability and mitigation of genuine student disadvantage are commendable objectives, but we are supposed to, as per the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*¹¹, “in determining whether an adjustment is reasonable” consider “any effect of the adjustment on anyone else affected, including the education provider, staff and other students, and the costs and benefit of making the adjustment”. It is possible that a correction could come in the form of legal challenges brought by students or staff who have had their educational or career opportunities curtailed as a result of persistent misbehaviour. I certainly think that the records exist to sustain such challenges.

The ascendance of the inclusivity agenda and the toleration of misbehaviour is undoubtedly impeding schools’ ability to educate. If the government is serious about reversing the decline of educational outcomes in this country this problem needs to be honestly confronted. The institutional adoption of a narrow brand of academic mumbo jumbo that insists students (and by logical extension people generally) are not responsible for what they do ties the hands of those who would ensure orderly and productive classrooms. In my view the current policy settings are disastrous for the academic and moral development of children and need the most urgent revision.

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