



Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment
Inquiry into the Issue of Increasing Disruption in Australian School Classrooms
March 2023

Introduction

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA) is the peak body in South Australia representing the interests of young people as well as organisations, networks and youth workers throughout the non-government youth sector. YACSA policy positions are independent and not aligned with any political party or movement.

YACSA supports the fundamental right of young people to contribute to all aspects of community life, particularly the decision-making processes that impact them, and so is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a response to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment's Inquiry into the Issue of Increasing Disruption in Australian School Classrooms. YACSA acknowledges young people's right to education and the important role education has in young people's lives.

YACSA regularly consults with young people and the organisations that support them to understand their experiences of education, especially in the pandemic context. This submission will provide a perspective that considers the needs and experiences of young people.

Key points

- PISA may not have scope to adequately consider the broader context of education.
- The majority of disruptive behaviour in Australian classrooms is disengagement-based.
- Mental health challenges and low wellbeing impact academic achievement.
- International jurisdictions have achieved success in student learning while shifting focus away from high-stakes standardised assessment.

Young people in context

Young people and classroom disruption cannot be viewed in isolation. YACSA maintains that recognising the experiences and needs of young people holistically is vital to supporting opportunities to learn essential skills to reach their full educational, economic and social potential. Student behaviour in school has dominated education discussions for some time in Australia and with assistance from the media, political and community concern over negative behaviour has led to policy reforms, changes in teaching practices and inquiriesⁱ.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is extensive and allows for comparisons to be made between up to 80 countries by comparing student achievement in key areas, however, PISA is primarily an economic measure and not necessarily a suitable tool to determine best practice in education as a standalone instrumentⁱⁱ. Limitations of PISA mean important education outcomes like attitudes to learning, communication skills, engagement and participation are given limited considerationⁱⁱⁱ.

Disengagement disadvantage

The perceived increasing disruptions in Australian classrooms must be viewed with recognition of greater details concerning what these disruptions are. Research over several decades demonstrates that disorderly and disruptive behaviour in Australian classrooms predominantly consists of low-level behaviours including disengagement^{iv}, work avoidance and idleness,^v and other behaviours that are minor in nature and high in frequency^{vi}. This evidence indicates, generally, the issue of increasing behaviour problems from students is largely overstated by the media and broader community^{vii}.

Disengagement behaviours are the most prevalent disruptive behaviours in classrooms and these behaviours are reported by teachers as being difficult to manage^{viii}. The underlying causes of disengagement from learning relate more to environmental factors, curriculum and the current marginalisation of specific cohorts of students than any factors within students' control^{ix}. Consequently, aims to improve Australia's disciplinary climate ranking via higher levels of discipline is unlikely to address the underlying issue of disengagement behaviours. Building engagement strategies and skills among teachers would be more effective in addressing the majority of concerning disruptive behaviours within Australian classrooms^x.

Experiences for students

While the latest PISA shows Australian classrooms disciplinary climate index is decreasing, and granted disruptive behaviour does have some impact on academic achievement, it is impossible to ignore the broader context of perceived stagnant literacy and numeracy testing results among Australian students.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate the relationship between mental health and academic achievement yet there is no nationally consistent measure to track changes in student wellbeing^{xi}. UNICEF evidence shows Australian young people experience some of the lowest wellbeing and mental health levels in the developed world^{xii}. There has been a drastic increase in experiences of psychological distress among young people for some years^{xiii} and almost half of Australian young people report feeling stressed most to all of the time^{xiv}.

Additionally, the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on young people further affected their mental health and wellbeing^{xv}. Challenges young people face like financial insecurity, generational inequality, social isolation and uncertainty about their future were present prior to COVID-19 and were intensified both during the pandemic and now during the housing and cost of living crises^{xvi}. Despite this, support services remain inaccessible for young people due to long wait times^{xvii} and high out-of-pocket costs^{xviii}.

Schools have a responsibility to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people and the potential impact of poor mental health and low wellbeing on students' engagement in schooling and their academic achievement cannot be ignored.

Another important factor in the experience of students is the role teachers have in learning and how teacher behaviour can impact student learning, academic achievement and wellbeing^{xix}. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (2020) explored similarities and differences between countries that participated in PISA 2018, with a focus on how PISA 2018 related to Australia's National Assessment Program. This report found teacher behaviour that has a detrimental impact on student learning increased between PISA 2012 and PISA 2018 and that the least disadvantaged students were impacted to a lesser extent than the most disadvantaged students^{xx} further indicating that educational equity remains a key issue.

Shifting the results focus

Schooling in Australia began to focus on high-stakes testing with the introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in 2008 which was implemented to ensure confidence in education standards. At the time, introducing this style of testing was presented alongside discussion of achieving educational equity^{xxi}. Improvements to educational equity in Australia have not been achieved as longitudinal surveys demonstrate that socioeconomic status continues to have a significant impact on academic achievement^{xxii}. Without reaching aims to improve academic achievement or educational equity, potential detrimental impacts of a focus on high-stakes testing must be considered.

There is evidence of a connection between testing like NAPLAN, and lower wellbeing and mental health levels among students^{xxiii}. Teachers, schools, parents, students and the broader community are increasingly concerned about the impacts of mental ill-health and low wellbeing levels among young people and welcomed the Education Council's decision to cancel NAPLAN during COVID-19 in 2020 in recognition of additional strains on teachers, schools and student wellbeing^{xxiv}. In 2023, while governments have made the decision to move on from the pandemic, record-high rates of psychological distress, anxiety, depression and low wellbeing continue to impact young people as they prepare for another year of NAPLAN testing.

Overall standardised testing can provide data and information for decision-makers concerning resourcing and academic progress; however, international jurisdictions have seen success while shifting away from high-stakes standardised testing after recognising evidence of potential negative impacts of this approach on education and student wellbeing^{xxv}. These jurisdictions have adopted a priority on developing teachers' professional capacity to utilise assessments for improved student learning and therefore improved schooling quality. Many of these changes aimed to develop holistic support of students, their academic achievements and the broader school environment which other research suggests can help to address the impact of students' socioeconomic status on academic achievement^{xxvi}. Fundamentally, these improvements were possible largely because of an education system-wide refocus on student needs and their experiences^{xxvii}.

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