



Behaviour in Australian Schools: Current Trends and Possibilities

Take home messages

In the opening paper, Professor Bruce Johnson (UniSA) argued that dominant discourses of control focus on individuals' behaviour and what is 'wrong' with them. He identified the reasons why 'traditionalist-neoconservative-hard-authoritarian-power over-zero tolerance' discourses are the most dominant in schools.

In an historic overview of the school discipline field, Professor Roger Slee (Victoria University) light-heartedly explained how schools moved from using physical punishments ('Goodbye Mr Chips'), embraced behaviour management technologies involving the application of 'consequences' for misbehaviour ('Welcome Dirty Harry'), then finally medicalised student behaviour through the use of elaborate diagnostic processes that established what was 'wrong' with misbehaving students ('Hello Dr Phil').

Professor Barry Down (Murdoch University) provided a critique of approaches to behaviour management that locate 'the problem' of student disengagement and alienation within individual students and their families. He shifted the focus away from pathologising explanations of student behaviour by looking at the systems of schooling and how they work against the interests of particular groups of students. He then described several 'schools of hope' in which curricula and pedagogy are negotiated with students to promote engagement.

In a panel discussion facilitated by Bill Lucas, two school principals – Sue Le Poidevin from Allenby Gardens Primary, and Catherine Cox-Walliss from Mount Barker South Primary – gave very practical and grounded accounts of how their schools 'do behaviour differently'. They spoke of the gritty, complicated, and hard work they had undertaken over a number of years involving staff, students and parents to change the way student behaviour was addressed in their schools.

Associate Professor Rob Hattam (UniSA) presented findings from the Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN) Project. This project supported secondary school teachers in schools in the Northern suburbs of Adelaide to redesign pedagogy in a way that reflects local contexts to engage students. He argued that it is possible for school change to occur in ways that promote pedagogies of engagement.

Dr Tim McDonald (Director Catholic Education, WA) shared the results of the Western Australian 'Pipeline Project' which established that passive, non-disruptive disengagement was a major problem in classrooms. He framed the problem of student disengagement as a teaching and learning issue rather than as a behavioural issue caused by 'laziness', 'work avoidance', or 'poor attitudes'.

Associate Professor Linda Graham (Queensland University of Technology) demonstrated the importance of consulting with disaffected and marginalised youths who have been excluded from mainstream schools. Her research revealed that most of the young people had been excluded for reasons related to 'not doing school work' that was 'too hard' and 'irrelevant'. The boys she spoke to wanted teachers to be fairer, more supportive, more attentive and, most importantly, more respectful.

In the final paper, Dr Anna Sullivan (UniSA) outlined how behaviour related policies were enacted in five schools in ways that were largely consistent with the philosophical aspirations of their leaders. These aspirations are not new but the study contributes to a greater understanding of how school leaders use micropolitics to do their policy work. More importantly, the study provides a deeper understanding of how school leaders and teachers interpret, translate and enact behaviour policies in a policy context full of contradictions and competing demands.

Dr Tim McDonald, Megan Mitchell and Jim Davies took part in a panel discussion facilitated by Dr Anna Sullivan which summarised the conversations of the day and proposed directions for future consideration. Megan Mitchell (National Children's Commissioner) argued that one of the challenges for educators is to work out how to engage children in a changing world, through making school interesting and understanding where kids are coming from. Jim Davies (CEO Principals Australia Institute) suggested that it is important to reconsider the 'space' and 'place' of schooling, and move away from classrooms as 'square boxes'. He also recommended that there is a need for curriculum and pedagogy to be meaningful and relevant to young people today. Dr Tim McDonald (Director Catholic Education Office, WA) suggested the possibility of establishing a coalition of advocates for young people and the formulation of a statement about acceptable behaviour management in schools. He also reflected on the importance for teachers to be able to reframe student behaviours by focussing on the positive rather than the negative.

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For further information please contact the convenor Dr Anna Sullivan
anna.sullivan@unisa.edu.au T: 08 8302 4252