



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.



**Centre for Disability
Research and Policy**

Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

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Introduction

This submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System is made by neurodivergent researcher Dr Damian Mellifont of the Centre for Disability Research and Policy. The submission offers an evidence-based response in relation to question 8: What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively?

The response to the above-mentioned question has been structured into the following four sections:

1. Acknowledging a pressing policy issue involving the ongoing bullying and abuse of neurodivergent students in Australian schools
2. Evidence-based questioning about the effectiveness of school mental health programs
3. The risk of school-based mental health programs promoting an 'othering' of neurodivergent students
4. Supporting a policy shift towards neuro-inclusive programs across Australian schools.

Response to question 8 in the Consultation Paper

8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively?

Acknowledging a pressing policy issue involving the ongoing bullying and abuse of neurodivergent students in Australian schools

School students with Autism have self-reported experiencing bullying at a prevalence rate of 64 percent.¹ With this deeply troubling statistic in mind, perhaps a more appropriate question to inform this policy issue of bullying and abuse of neurodivergent students in Australian schools is, what does it look like when a school is **not** supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? Concisely stated, neurodivergent people are people who think in significantly different ways to the norm.² A school which is supportive of student mental health and wellbeing does not only *look like* but *is* a place that genuinely includes neurodivergent students and teachers. A need therefore exists to move away from school mental wellbeing programs that embrace the medical model of disability and which portray the neurodivergent student as having a mental weakness or disorder of which they must be 'cured'. Resisting this ableist and dangerous message, a timely call has been made for a strength-based approach in schools which celebrates and teaches about diversities including neurodivergence, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and culture³.

Evidence-based questioning about the effectiveness of school mental health programs

Concerns have been raised in the literature as to whether school mental wellbeing programs might be hindering more than helping students. To this end, an increasing volume of quantitative research is indicating that school-based mental health programs can be harmful.⁴ In particular, Ecclestone

¹ Ashburner, J., Saggars, B., Campbell, M. A., Dillon-Wallace, J. A., Hwang, Y. S., Carrington, S., & Bobir, N. (2019). How are students on the autism spectrum affected by bullying? Perspectives of students and parents. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 19(1), 27-44.

² Walker, N. (2023). Neurodiversity: Some basic terms and definitions. Retrieved from <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>

³ Armstrong, T. (2012). *Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life*. Alexandria, VA:

⁴ Foulkes, L., & Stringaris, A. (2023). Do no harm: can school mental health interventions cause iatrogenic harm?. *BJPsych Bulletin*, 1-3.

(2015) has cautioned about a lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programs towards improving students' mental wellbeing with such claims of success tending to arise from stakeholders with vested interests in this 'lucrative market'.⁵

The risk of school-based mental health programs promoting an 'othering' of neurodivergent students

With underlying messages of mental toughness and resilience, mental health school programs can readily overlook broader societal challenges and unfairly place blame on students who are seen as emotionally unwell.⁶ Ableism which is rife in Australian society represents one of these bigger societal issues. The wellbeing of neurodivergent people is thus largely impacted by the stigma, prejudice and ignorance of others in society.⁷ In addition, schools have been founded on a deep and persistent structure that rewards students who fit with established 'norms'.⁸ By overlooking these broader issues and continuing to favour normality over neurodivergence, mental wellbeing programs across Australian private and public schools risk promoting an us (i.e., a mentally healthy neurotypical student majority) versus the 'other' (i.e., a minority of students with diverse neurotypes).

Under a simplistic and othering approach, if you're not mentally well, if you're not 'normal', you simply must not be trying hard enough. This promotion of difference over inclusion in schools might then risk feeding into informally sanctioned bullying of neurodivergent students. Rather than trying to teach a neurodivergent child who is being bullied about developing social skills, the focus needs to be on teaching neurotypical students not to be bullies.⁹ Trying to force neurodivergent school children to mask and act normal is an example of abuse.

"We should be very cautious about the idea that providing any mental health intervention in a school is always better than not providing one at all."¹⁰

Supporting a policy shift towards neuro-inclusive programs across Australian schools

With large sums of money continuing to be spent on school mental wellbeing programs despite their associated risks and highly questionable results, investment is needed in neuro-inclusive school programs. Inclusive education works to accommodate the naturally occurring differences that are a core component of humanity.¹¹ This represents a positive policy shift away from mental wellbeing programs and their emphasis on 'fixing' neurodivergent school students, which in turn can raise

⁵ Ecclestone, K. (2015). Well-being programmes in schools might be doing children more harm than good. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/well-being-programmes-in-schools-might-be-doing-children-more-harm-than-good-36573>

⁶ Ecclestone, K. (2015). Well-being programmes in schools might be doing children more harm than good. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/well-being-programmes-in-schools-might-be-doing-children-more-harm-than-good-36573>

⁷ Aitken, D. & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022). Neurodiversity-affirmative education: why and how?. Retrieved from <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/neurodiversity-affirmative-education-why-and-how>

⁸ Smagorinsky, P. (2020). Neurodiversity and the deep structure of schools. *Ought: the Journal of Autistic Culture*, 2(1), 4.

⁹ Aitken, D. & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022). Neurodiversity-affirmative education: why and how?. Retrieved from <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/neurodiversity-affirmative-education-why-and-how>

¹⁰ Foulkes, L., & Stringaris, A. (2023). Do no harm: can school mental health interventions cause iatrogenic harm?. *BJPsych Bulletin*, 1-3.

¹¹ Aitken, D. & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022). Neurodiversity-affirmative education: why and how?. Retrieved from <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/neurodiversity-affirmative-education-why-and-how>

anxiety, mental ill health and exclusion.¹² Hence, neuro-inclusive programs that encourage neurodivergent pride and respect for neurodivergence among students and teachers need to take precedence over divisive school-based mental health programs.

¹² Aitken, D. & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022). Neurodiversity-affirmative education: why and how?. Retrieved from <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/neurodiversity-affirmative-education-why-and-how>

About the Centre for Disability Research and Policy

The Centre for Disability Research and Policy (CDRP) at the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Sydney aims to change the disadvantage that occurs for people with disabilities. We do this through addressing their social and economic participation in society, and their health and wellbeing. By focusing on data that demonstrates disadvantage, we can develop models of policy and practice to better enable support and opportunity for people with disabilities.

About Dr Damian Mellifont

As a Lived Experience Postdoctoral Fellow, Damian Mellifont (PhD) leads and contributes to studies that advance the economic and social inclusion of people with disability. Damian is a member of the Centre for Disability Research and Policy (CDRP) leadership team at The University of Sydney. With more than 30 scholarly publications, Damian has been an active member of the Centre over the last decade, with extensive prior experience in government policy. Damian strongly advocates for the disability inclusion mantra of, 'Nothing About Us Without Us' to be consistently applied to research about disability.