



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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### Summary

School funding could be used more effectively and efficiently in Australia by prioritising building positive teacher-student relationships. Positive teacher-student relationships enhance student engagement, and student engagement is linked with better learning outcomes. Findings from research conducted with young people who disengaged from mainstream schools in Australia, and re-engaged with an alternative school have shown that relationships were central to both their disengagement and re-engagement with education.

The key actions that enhance positive teacher-student relationships in schools include:

- Showing that you care
- Making students feel welcome and wanted at school
- Demonstrating respect and trust

The greatest barriers to building positive teacher-student relationships are time, and teacher confidence and skills. Thus, it is recommended that funding be directed within schools to ensuring that staff have more time, and are given specific training for building and maintaining positive, strong relationships with their students.

Whilst teacher-student relationships are not the singular factor in student engagement—they exist within a broader environment that impacts student engagement—we know that poor teacher-student relationships contribute to student disengagement, and positive teacher-student relationships enhance engagement, keep students at school, and enhance their learning outcomes. Given that disengaged students in Australia are one to two years behind their peers (Goss, Sonnemann, & Griffiths, 2017), if learning outcomes are to be improved, it is crucial that greater funding is directed to building and maintaining strong, positive teacher-student relationships in all schools that will benefit all students.

Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., & Griffiths, K. (2017). Engaging students: creating classrooms that improve learning. Retrieved from: Grattan Institute

## Main submission

### Introduction

Over the last six years, I have undertaken research with young Australian's for whom mainstream school did not work. These students told me of the challenges they faced attending mainstream schools, and of their success in re-engaging with an alternative school setting (Kardinia [a pseudonym]). In this project, 62 young people completed an online questionnaire, six staff participated in a focus group, I spent 200 hours undertaking participant observation, and 15 students and two parents were interviewed. Data were analysed using constructivist grounded theory techniques.

It was clear that relationships with teachers were crucial in their engagement with school, and this submission will focus on this to answer the question of 'How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students?'. First, a summary of existing evidence that demonstrates links between student engagement, relationships and learning outcomes is provided. This is followed by specific examples of actions that enhance teacher-student relationships from my research findings. The final section provides recommendations for using funding more effectively to improve student outcomes through building and maintaining teacher-student relationships.

I am writing this submission because the students in this study chose to participate because they wanted their voices heard. They wanted people with decision-making power to know what had, and had not worked for them, in the hope that changes to schools would be made and improve the educational experiences of all young people. Not listening to student voice when instigating change is problematic in that it positions students as objects of reform, and such reform may not appropriately meet their needs (Levin, 2000).

### Positive teacher-student relationships, engagement, and learning outcomes

Students learn more when they are engaged in class (Goss, Sonnemann, & Griffiths, 2017; Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015; Lee, 2014), and engagement is a crucial prerequisite to learning (Gallagher, Bennett, Keen, & Muspratt, 2017). Additionally, caring, supportive relationships provide a strong foundation for learning, and are a crucial aspect of students' motivation to attend school and be actively engaged in their education (Gallagher et al., 2017; Goss et al., 2017; Rey, Smith, Yoon, Somers, & Barnett, 2007). When students feel cared for and noticed at school, their confidence and motivation increases, they develop better learning strategies, are more cooperative in the classroom, have a greater sense of belonging, and more positive perceptions of school (Fan, 2011; Kennedy, 2010; Lee, 2012).

These relationships are especially important for adolescents, for students considered at risk of non-completion, low-income students, and students with learning difficulties (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). These relationships are also important for the learning outcomes of academically advanced students (Henderson & Jarvis, 2016), particularly where the implicit negative attitudes of teachers impact their interactions with students affecting students' opportunities for learning (Geake & Gross, 2008).

The findings of my PhD research revealed that poor relationships with teachers in mainstream schools were the key reason students disengaged from school, and positive relationships with staff at Kardinia were central to their engagement with school and the positive outcomes they experienced. Some of the outcomes experienced by students included:

- Gaining academic and professional qualifications and credentials
- Realising academic capabilities
  - Finishing work more easily, and faster than previously
  - Exceeding expectations
- Enjoying school and learning
  - No longer watching the clock to be allowed to go home
  - Decreased conflict at home (related to getting up for school in the morning)
  - Setting new goals that previously seemed unattainable
- Becoming a 'better person'
  - Cutting off bad friends, making good friends
  - Not being angry anymore
  - Making better health choices – quitting smoking, drugs, being in a better sleeping routine
  - Gaining a sense of legitimacy and purpose in the world
- Feeling worthy and capable of attaining the good future they hoped for

Actions to enhance teacher-student relationships

This research has revealed that the three most important actions staff can take to build positive relationships with students are to:

1. Show that you care
2. Make students feel welcome and wanted
3. Demonstrate respect and trust

Show that you care

Feeling cared for was crucial for students building positive relationships with their teachers and other staff. Staff showed they cared by taking time to get to know students on a personal level, genuinely listening to what they had to say, and supporting them with their academic and wellbeing needs. Students often described

staff as being like friends or family. Chris (17) found that making connections with staff was easy because “They’re not just all serious, they all joke around with ya. They hang around a bit”. Sharing personal information of their own with students helped students to view them as ‘real’ people rather than an authority figure who was ‘only’ a teacher. They too were people with real lives outside of school. They became real people to whom they could relate.

Giving students opportunities to have a say, and genuinely listening to them showed that staff cared. When staff called students to ask why they were absent rather than ringing their parents, or put the student at the centre of conversations when parents were present, this told students that their voice mattered and staff cared about their views and wanted to support, not punish them. This generated a greater sense of respect and reciprocity whereby students felt driven to do the right thing because their teachers had supported them, and also expected they would keep their word. Listening to students and not giving up on them ensured that students felt cared for at school.

They’re my mates. They have time to listen to our problems and will never give up trying on us (Alex, 15).

The support students referred to was crucial to the relationships they held with staff. This support was unprecedented: this was not the type nor commitment to support they received in previous schools. Tom (16) said the main difference he noticed was that “They actually wanna help ya... They’ll go to any length to get you to where you want to go”. Brendan (19) said, “The teachers actually help you here, they pay more attention to ya, where other schools didn’t”. The notion of staff ‘actually’ helping students was new, and different to what students had experienced in the past.

Other actions that showed students that staff cared included:

- Celebrating birthdays
- Providing food
- Designing curriculum that aligned with student interests and goals
- Allowing breaks when students needed them

Make students feel welcome and wanted

Feeling welcome and wanted at school was crucial to students’ sense of belonging and the strength of their relationships with staff. Students felt noticed and that staff knew who they were as individuals. When asked to describe the differences in how students were treated at mainstream schools compared to Kardinia, Brendan (19) said “Noticed. Yeah. Noticed. Definitely. They pay more attention to ya where other schools didn’t... It was a lot harder to get a teacher to notice you at normal schools”. The way that staff greeted students when they arrived at school was important in this regard. For example, Chris (17) said that he felt good when his teacher acknowledged that he had come to school: “Like you walk in and he goes ‘Oh you’ve

come'. Like you don't get that at a normal school". Staff at the school commented on this being a very deliberate approach whereby all staff were expected to acknowledge students when they saw them, to not focus only on the students in their class.

Whether they're meeting admin staff or wellbeing staff or... They get the same response, the same positive response. They're told like simple things like "It's nice to see you", "Schools a better place when you're here". So it's a consistent message across the board (John, staff member).

Feeling monitored and targeted by teachers in other schools decreased students' sense of belonging, and created further distance between students and staff, making interactions difficult, and often confrontational. In addition to the above examples, staff at Kardinia made students feel welcome and wanted by acknowledging their positive progress and efforts. Receiving positive attention strengthened the relationships between students and staff, and reinforced the benefits of engaging with school because students that the good things they were doing were recognised.

#### Demonstrate respect and trust

Demonstrating respect and trust creates an environment that is safe for students to ask for help, views students as capable young people, minimises power hierarchies, and provides space for students to make, and learn from, their own choices.

For many students, a poor or distant relationship with staff in mainstream schools often meant they felt unable or embarrassed to ask for help. Some students avoided asking for help out of fear of feeling 'stupid'. This led to them falling behind to a point where their hope of catching up diminished,

I was very bad like with schoolwork, I didn't understand how to do any of the work ... But you know the teachers they, I think they would look at me with stupidity if I ever did things like that, it was very embarrassing. So I couldn't ask for help or anything like that (Marcus, 16).

For some students, not asking for help further compromised their relationships with teachers, making school a more hostile place. Peter described how his son was too embarrassed to ask for help, and that when the teacher asked what work he had done, he would have nothing to show, which would escalate the already tense relationship he had with his teachers.

He was, probably the word I'd use is embarrassed, to ask questions. He felt like everyone looked at him like an idiot, so he wouldn't ask. He'd just sit there doing nothing, and when the teacher asked him for his work, he had none to produce, and then it'd just escalate again (Peter, parent).

Respect for students was shown by staff at Kardinia speaking to students using the same tone and style of language they did with other staff, giving students greater

autonomy over decision making, and not trying to control them. Feeling respected by staff was often a new experience that students were eager to maintain. For Marcus, the respect given to him by staff had instilled motivation to do homework and to maintain the positive reputation he had acquired,

I do homework now because I respect the school and I think I've got um... A responsibility to keep if you can say that... The teachers think that I'm a good student and I think I want to keep it that way. I think I'm very respected by the teachers (Marcus, 16).

Tom (16) explained how he resisted doing work at other schools because he felt that he had no choice, but at Kardinia, he did his work because he wasn't being forced. The flexibility and respect students were shown demonstrated that they were trusted, and as well as reciprocating respect, they also learnt that they could trust staff.

Minimising power hierarchies helped strengthen relationships because it meant that students saw staff as respectful, caring adults, rather than authority figures to resist against. Actions that minimised these hierarchies were often very simple – for example, allowing students to call staff by their first name, and staff sitting at the same table as students, rather than at the front of the room with students lined up in front of them. Examples described earlier, such as calling students instead of parents, and genuinely listening to students also helped in this regard. Students also commented that one of the things they liked about the staff at Kardinia was that they didn't yell. Although this seems simple, it has a strong impact on students' engagement and their interactions with staff.

### Recommendations

The most significant barriers to improving teacher-student relationships in the classroom are time constraints, and teacher skills and confidence. The lack of time available to teachers in mainstream schools to build relationships with students was recognised by students, parents, and staff in this study. This aligns with existing research nationally and internationally (Freeman, O'Malley, & Eveleigh, 2014; Roffey, 2016). As the greatest barrier to building relationships, it is strongly recommended that funding be directed within schools to ensuring that staff have more time to implement the practices mentioned above that help with relationship building. Additionally, funding should also be directed to providing training to teachers to develop and maintain positive, strong relationships with their students.

Decreasing class sizes, and/or increasing the number of staff in the classroom at one time. Smaller class sizes help to facilitate positive teacher-student relationships (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016) and are wanted by teachers in Australia who feel it would enable them to better manage student behaviour, pay individualised attention to students, and have time to check student learning during class (Garrick

et al., 2017). Other evidence shows that students in smaller classes are more likely to be engaged in learning activities (Zyngier, 2014) and that the impact of high quality emotional and instructional support is strongest in smaller classes (Allen et al., 2013).

Provide training to teachers for building positive relationships with students. This training should include some focus on self-regulation for teachers, responding appropriately when students seek help, listening, and trauma-informed practice that provides greater understanding of the importance of consistency and attachment and how to do it. When teachers feel unprepared and stressed, they are more likely to respond to students in ways that damage relationships with students, alienate students, and increase student disengagement (Goss et al., 2017). Professional development for teachers that is focused on emotional, organisational, and instructional interactions with students is recommended in order to have positive impact on relationships, and student learning outcomes (Allen et al., 2013; Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, Justice, & Pianta, 2010).

### Conclusion

Whilst teacher-student relationships are not the singular factor in student engagement—they exist within a broader environment that impacts student engagement—we know that poor teacher-student relationships contribute to student disengagement, and positive teacher-student relationships enhance engagement, keep students at school, and enhance their learning outcomes. Given that disengaged students in Australia are one to two years behind their peers (Goss et al., 2017), if learning outcomes are to be improved, it is crucial that greater funding is directed to building and maintaining strong, positive teacher-student relationships in all schools that will benefit all students.

I appreciate the opportunity to make this submission and to respond to questions raised in the Issues Paper. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

The views expressed in this submission are the author's own and do not represent the views of any organisation with which she is affiliated. For information about the author, please visit <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/public-health/staff/profile?uname=CHobbs>

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