Issues of Professional Practice

Why Students Reject School, The Middle Years of Schooling, & The Inexplicably Noisy Classroom

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PART A/Q1: Why do Students Reject School

Retention is and important issue for schools to address. Not only because of the numbers of students that choose to reject school, but also because of the negative outcomes these students subsequently face.

It is an important issue because of the large proportion of students that this issue affects and the significantly different outcomes experienced by students who do complete year 12 when compared with those that do not. The retention rates for all schools to year 10 is 94.2, by year 11, this falls to 86.7 and by year 12, the retention rate is 73.4. While this figure is low, it represents a significant improvement from the 1981 statistic that "only 39 per cent of the Year 10 cohort progressed to Year 12" (Business Council of Australia 2002, p.9). Certain social groups were over-represented within those who left school early, including students from a low socio-economic status families, students in remote areas and indigenous and ethnic groups (Business Council of Australia 2002, p.11). Of those who left school early, over 63% were not pursuing any form of education and training, with 33% either unemployed or not in the workforce (Business Council of Australia 2002, p.12).

Schools appear either oblivious to retention problems, or in the case of some recently publicised private schools, happy when under achieving students 'drop-out'. Today, however, the scope of the school's role in an individual's life, is far broader. In addition to the creation of lifelong learners, schools should be responsible for the transition from the school environment to the 'real-world'. While schools may be aware of the need for specific retention programs, recent experiences have revealed little in the way of explicit anti-rejection strategies.

This awareness has reached the upper echelons of the Federal Government, through the Department of Education, Science and Training, which has recently implemented the Partnership Outreach Education Model pilot program. It was "designed to test new ways of engaging young people who have become disconnected from mainstream education, and often their families and communities as well" (DEST 2004).

However other research identifies more tenuous links between the intra-school processes and retention/rejection. Individual teacher qualities appear determinative factors in rejection of school. "Specific teacher attitudes and behaviours [such as] empathy, acceptance, warmth, genuineness" appear to impact greatly upon "students' self-concept, learning and behaviour" (Neville 2004). Similarly a "facilitative or supportive" school environment can have very positive outcomes. However there appears to be no certainty or universally applicable opinion in appropriate measure to achieve good retention. Neville (2004) identifies that there has been calls for:

- More autocratic schooling (at risk students need order and direction)
- More academically focussed education (at risk students need clear academic goals and strong academic support)
- More vocationally oriented schooling (students need to prepare for employment)
- More caring schooling (students at risk need emotional support)

The following table that has been compiled primarily from personal observations and opinion reveals that no one strategy necessarily can be employed across the board. A particular approach needs to be chosen depending on the particular case at hand. That being said, a generally inclusive, engaging and relevant approach should be utilised in every instance.

Category	Reason for Rejection	Solution
Socio/historical	Familial history of non-participation	Liaise directly with the family to discuss the benefits of continuing education and lifelong learning. Also discuss the benefits of adult and vocational education opportunities for all members of the family.
	Familial history of non-achievement	Ensure that adequate in-school and after-school assistance is provided to circumvent any deficiencies in the in-home support that is being given.
	Familial history of non-reliance on education for employment or other purposes	Discuss the benefits of continuing formal schooling, whilst clearly demonstrating the links between school, continuing education and employment. This could involve site visits or presentation by representatives of various professions with explicit discussion of the role of school education in their career outcomes.
	Familial pressure to reject school	Liaise directly with the family to discuss the benefits of continuing education and lifelong learning. Also discuss the benefits of adult and vocational education opportunities for all members of the family.
	Other familial pressures (e.g. pressure to succeed)	Provide adequate individual assistance to the student (or referral to appropriate support staff) to manage the pressure from home, and supplement with study technique training and time management skills. Liaise directly with the family to discuss the role of pressure/stress in educational outcomes.

Category	Reason for Rejection	Solution
School issues	Special needs not being addressed adequately by school	Apply all relevant special needs pedagogies and ensure that the special needs are being addressed in a coordinated fashion across the school. Ensure full inclusion occurs where practicable and specialised support services are available when necessary.
	The needs of a gifted student not being met	Apply all relevant gifted student teaching pedagogies and ensure that the students' needs are being addressed in a coordinated fashion across the school.
	Delivery/Pedagogy – classes not engaging, interesting, thought provoking	Ensure each lesson/topic makes clear connections to post-school outcomes and real-world applications. Ensure that any theory is balanced against student participation in authentic tasks. Address each issue using actual examples (preferably locally relevant). Apply innovative teaching strategies employing a multitude of differing activities and utilising ICTs where possible/applicable.
Alternative Options	Other forms of training/education preferred (e.g. TAFE and other VET)	The choice of alternative education or training should not, alone be considered problematic. Alternatives such as VET program offer specialised training that may serve an individual's needs, and as such, the choice may not be indicative of an underlying problem. However if the choice is prompted (forced) by dissatisfaction with traditional school education then solutions must be found. VET programs are already embedded within the conventional Queensland school system, thereby providing the best of both worlds for students.
Spatial/Access	Remote school/remote student – difficulty accessing	Provide adequate means of accessing school resources, either online or through the provision of appropriate transport or through more intensive and flexible timetabling (e.g. condensing school into a three or four day week)
	Lack of adequate/affordable public transport	Canvass whole school community, local and state members of parliament to ensure adequate transport is provided to allow students to access the school.
Student Interactions	Bullying	Implement a whole of school anti-bullying strategy, including preventative and restorative measures.
	Peer pressure to drop out	Discuss the benefits of continuing formal schooling, whilst clearly demonstrating the links between school, continuing education and employment. This could involve site visits or presentation by representatives of various professions with explicit discussion of the role of school education in their career outcomes.
	Drug and alcohol influences	Implement a whole of school anti-drug and alcohol strategy, including preventative and restorative measures.
Individual Engagement	Relevance of material in lessons to the 'real-world'	Ensure each lesson/topic makes clear connections to post-school outcomes and real-world applications. Ensure that any theory is balanced against student participation in authentic tasks. Address each issue using actual examples (preferably locally relevant).
	Family problems e.g. abuse or illness	Provide an open and caring school environment with adequately staffed and resourced student counselling section, and include to training for all staff so they can identify and respond to any perceived issues of abuse or illness.
	Boredom	Ensure each lesson/topic makes clear connections to post-school outcomes and real-world applications. Ensure that any theory is balanced against student participation in authentic tasks. Address each issue using actual examples (preferably locally relevant). Apply innovative teaching strategies employing a multitude of differing activities and utilising ICTs where possible/applicable.
Life Choices	Fatherhood/motherhood	Provide a flexible and caring school environment, with suitable resources and timetabling/assessment flexibility so that new mothers and fathers can stay/return to school. This may include lessons in the evening or the facilities so that children can accompany their parents to class.

Category	Reason for Rejection	Solution
Financial	Financial issues – personal or family	Provide financial counselling/referral services so that students and their families can better manage their resources. Also teacher in a flexible manner so that students who cannot afford extra activities are not disadvantaged.
	Work commitments	Provide a flexible and caring school environment, with suitable resources and timetabling/assessment flexibility so that students that need to work can still attend classes. Students can be encouraged to enter formal VET programs run from the school.
Socio-political	High Rates of Unemployment	Students become disillusioned by high unemployment rates and ask why bother when there are no post-school employment opportunities waiting. Employment and job relevant skills should be taught, as well as community wide strategies being employed to increase local employment opportunities.
	Compulsory nature of school (rebelling against authority)	Ensure that school is delivered in a flexible manner with sufficient alternative pathways provided to catch any students that reject the conventional path. Indoctrinate students as to the personal benefits as a means of offsetting any feelings of loss of individual liberties.

While this table lists a number of influencing factors, it does not, in itself, answer why students reject school. Another student, under similar circumstances may indeed, continue with their education and succeed. In part, this can be accounted for by asserting that no one factor is ultimately determinative upon the decision to reject school, rather it is a blend of issues peculiar to the individual that decides.

PART A/2: The Middle Years of Schooling

The middle years of secondary schooling, especially years 9 and 10 are increasingly being seen as a vital stage in the learning development of students. Within these middle years, the perception of school changes. For many this change is from perceptions that are generally to positive, towards very negative opinions of the school, teachers and learning in general. As we have seen in the previous section, these negative perceptions can ultimately lead to the rejection of formal education and lead to negative post-school outcomes for those students.

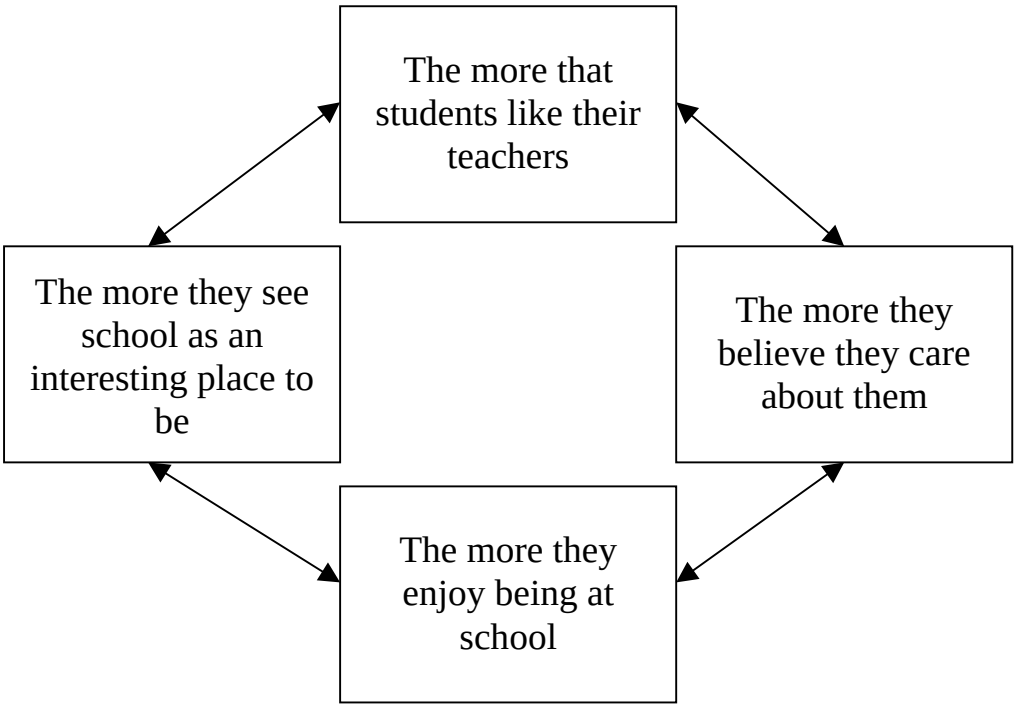
Luckily, the issue of student perceptions of, and performance in the middle years of secondary schooling has been a growing area of research and strategising. By drawing upon this research and my own observations within year 8, 9 and 10 Science and SOSE classes, I can try to account for these students interests and concerns and develop some potential responses to them.

The differing opinions of school and learning between primary and secondary students can vary greatly. The following list, compiled from the recent report by Black (2004, pp. 1-7) summarises some of these:

- 57% of primary students say they want to come to school on most days, as opposed to only 44% of secondary students.
- 62% of boys who were performing badly at school in Queensland, chose the image of prison to described their school experience.
- 27% of year 5 students say they want to leave school as soon as they can. This exceeds 30% in year 9 overall, and is as high as 40% in some schools.
- 56% of primary students say their teachers give them time to really explore and understand new ideas, while only 34% of secondary students responded the same.
- Only 18% of year 9 students describe the work they do in class as interesting, while 68% of secondary teachers believe their students find the work interesting.
- Year 9 students tend to believe that their teachers only really care about the smarter kids, rather than teachers wanting all students to understand their work.
- 63% of primary and 34% of secondary students believe that their teachers let them have some say as to what they do in class.
- Only 29% of secondary students felt that their teachers took a personal interest in them as a student.

So what is happening in the few short years between primary and secondary schooling? How can opinion change so rapidly? Who is to blame? And what can be done to reverse this trend?

Essentially the first question is one for the developmental psychologists or sociologists. There appears to be a relationship between the increasing responsibility being placed on the student as they advance through the school system, and the negative opinions of it that they develop. Black (2004, p.3) believes (as I do too) that "the single factor that most contributes to student progress is the learning relationship between teachers and students." The process can be summarised as this:



This cyclically reinforcing process is obviously breaking down at some particular point. My observations suggest that as the level of personal responsibility placed on the student increases, the greater the feeling of detachment from, and the greater the perceptions of lack of caring within the school environment. This is inevitable with the top-down development of teaching strategies, without proper student consideration or involvement. As students are obliged to take more responsibility for their learning, this should be balanced against a mutual obligation on the teacher to allow greater student involvement in the development and management of the

teaching process. Otherwise the student has the responsibility but no avenue to express it, hence frustration, anger and boredom.

The middle years of schooling are a period of great individual change, both physical and psychological. Inevitably, the student's relationship with the teacher changes. It changes from one closer aligned to a 'parent-child' relationship – the younger student relies on the teacher for guidance – to one of a more professional nature. It is common behaviour management practice for the teacher to keep student-teacher interactions professional (or to use the appropriate terminology, for the teacher to remain in the adult ego-state), thus prompting a more adult and reasoned response from the student.

As they mature, students start to ask 'Why am I here?' 'What is there for me after school?' As we saw above, this can lead to a questioning of their actual participation in the education system at all. It can lead to withdrawn or hostile behaviour, or result in the student taking up the challenge and flourishing. Certainly peer interactions and external influences from family and the media can reinforce or diminish a student's own developing opinion of the role of school, especially in the middle years. Perhaps it is not causative, but rather can serve as justification or validation for a chosen path.

PART B/T2: The Inexplicably Noisy Classroom

On occasion you may be sitting at home watching the local weather report. To your surprise you hear the town ten kilometres down the road has received fifty millimetres of rain overnight whereas your hometown received only six. How can that be? The band of cloud stretches hundreds of kilometres, from the Pacific to the Great Australian Bight, yet the minute subtlety within such a large system is continually confounding. How can two places with seemingly identical features, so close to one another, experience such a difference? Try asking a meteorologist why? I have. They start talking in layman's terms, but the conversation soon deteriorates into incomprehensible and almost unpronounceable terminology that refers to computer models, and multi-million dollar super computers and concludes with the statement "despite this we still really don't know the answer."

What is the point of all this I hear you ask. Well, when it comes to teaching, there are inexplicable differences between classes, the explanation of which lies in the realms of the impossibly complicated. This in turn poses difficult questions for the teacher. How does the teacher approach a class that is noisy, when all of the other classes being taught are attentive?

To answer this question I propose to do things. First I will discuss my first hand experiences with a class such as this, to identify what was happening in that class, and to account for why it was happening in that instance. Second, I will discuss my responses and alternative approaches to each incident. This will not be a prescriptive list of things to apply to each situation, rather it constitute a table of 'the sort of things you need to look out for'. The 'anecdotal' nature of the paper hints at the rather more informal approach I have chosen to address this issue, and justifies some departure from normal academic convention.

It has become obvious over the last two years of pre-service practice that behaviour management is a very individual process. It is supposedly possible to delineate a number of responses based on the type of behaviour being encountered, or to apply a generic set of behaviour management strategies from the outset, to put-off any

deviations from the expected behaviour for the classroom. The reality is that there exists a symbiotic relationship between the students and teachers, whereby the interrelationship between the students and teacher, the whole school environments, and the individual characteristics of everybody present have a part to play in how the classroom operates. Hence, there will be no reliance on those accepted proponents of certain behaviour management strategies. At this late stage of pre-service training, it is essential to delineate a personal set of strategies and guidelines within which I am comfortable, and for which I know appear to work.

An Example of the Inexplicably Noisy Classroom.

The noisy class in this instance was in a year 10 Studies of Society and Environment Class, in a state school in Southeast Queensland. The class consisted of 28 students. A highly subjective determination (my and other teachers observations) found that about one third of the class were labelled as regular trouble makers (a disproportionately large number. It is tempting to blame bad luck for the inexplicably noisy classroom. Like a 'perfect storm' a number of mutually reinforcing factors can combine into a completely unmanageable situation. This can be exacerbated by school policy the limits the implementation of behaviour management strategies that may be determined to be most appropriate for that particular situation.

A number of other limiting/exacerbating factors were at play. It was a small classroom with little room to move about, or to separate the troublemakers from the others. They seemed oblivious to body language hints to be quiet. They also appeared to be as unresponsive to the regular teacher as they were to myself. In part this was reassuring, and highlighted that it was probably not 'my fault', by also highlighted the likely ongoing difficulties that I was to face and supports the proposition that maybe there are just classes where the particular combination of people and circumstances mean that nothing or little can be done.

The formally laidback approach taken in the particular classroom was in conflict with my ordinarily 'stricter' approach. The supervising teacher suggested that much of the interruptions should be ignored, as the students that wanted to learn were still paying attention. This highlights one particular conflict in managing this situation. On the one hand, the teacher must ensure inappropriate behaviour is handled calmly and

quickly, and that interruptions are not allowed during instructional phases of the lesson. On the other, inappropriate behaviour should be dealt with quickly and calmly, whilst keeping a sense of humour (MLEA Ch.3). A clear set of class rules, allows for the judicious and equitable apportionment of punishments and other sanctions when those rules have not been followed.

Perhaps students 'got one up on me' from the outset, and the 'balance of power' had shifted to them. While this was not wholly the case, at least not from the outset, it is difficult in an ongoing disruptive environment not to get frustrated. Teachers should be implementing steps to maintain control, but must ALSO appear to their students to be in control.

Clearly, as I discovered here, the teacher's behaviour influences that of the students. The teacher should hide feelings of frustration, but should also implement the appropriate classroom management techniques that will gain proper control. The teacher must try to remain in the adult ego-state, thus prompting a more adult and reasoned response from the students. By slipping into a visible state of irritation, the relationship between the student changes, as the balance of power moves towards the disruptive student's side. The teacher will be less able to deal with the situation in a confident manner. Following the 'action-research' process, changes along these lines were implemented, but with no success.

There was some structure within the class regarding basic standards of behaviour. There was to be no wearing of hats in the class and no leaning back on chairs. Students would get three warnings and then would be consequences. The use of bad language was not tolerated, and this together with other severe or ongoing infractions would result in a detention. The initial reaction would be either a verbal request for the student to desist inappropriate behaviour or to commence appropriate behaviour. In some instances, the students were talked to after the class. Neither approach seemed preferable, and no one approach appeared to limit the extent of the noise in the classroom.

As I mentioned above, while my personal preferences for behaviour management strategies were at odds with the resident teacher, it is often necessary to implement a

strategy that is at odds with the one that best fits the individual situation or the individual teacher. This is the life of the teacher in training, the beginning teacher and the relief teacher. That does not mean that it will always be a noisy and disruptive classroom, but it does mean that the ideal personally oriented approach cannot be fully implemented.

Things to look out for/implement

From these experiences and reflections I have identified two key points.

Impressions clearly are lasting when you first enter the classroom. It is accepted now as conventional wisdom (and rightfully so) that the initial contact with students should involve a clear discussion of the expectations relating to noise and behaviour generally. Over time, in the case at hand, the students became aware of the punishment for their particular behaviour, so why would early warning of punishments make any difference? It is about personal relationships, trust and respect. Including students in a preliminary discussion about class rules creates 'ownership' in relation to the classroom and the behaviour within it.

The second part of the equation is 'engaging and relevant' teaching. Again, the ability to apply this is limited by the particular situations and the duration of it. But when the material being delivered in this instance was particularly interesting, or relevant to many of the students' own experiences, the changes in behaviour were dramatic. Communication, communication, communication, is again the trick. Discuss the whole program, what you will teach and why. Get student input into the structure and content, and make any changes suggested that are appropriate.

In the case at hand, applying this, even given the limited time frame, would have made some difference, but the limitations were ultimately unsurmountable.

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