

Understanding and challenging dominant discourses about student behaviour at school

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Critical Events



Competing Discourses

Dominant	Alternative
Traditional	Progressive
Hard	Soft
Authoritarian	Laissez-faire
Power-over	Power-with
Authoritarian	Empowering

Our Argument

- ‘traditionalist – neoconservative – hard – authoritarian – power over – zero tolerance’ views dominate

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- strong rhetoric of **control** characterises most debates about student behaviour
- we analyse some of the reasons why authoritarian discourses persist
 - Macro (neo-liberal, neo-conservative ideology)
 - Micro (school and classroom level factors)

'Answering back...'

- How some schools are 'doing behaviour' differently
- Purpose of the Summit – public activism against authoritarian & punitive approaches to student behaviour at school

Why focus on discourses?

- Oral, written, and graphic 'texts' work to shape and construct our views
- Dominant discourses shape our attitudes, opinions and beliefs in such ways as to make those beliefs appear 'natural' and 'common sense'
- Counter-discourses – at a cost (derision and ridicule, reputation damage)

Evidence of discourses of control

- Official statements
- Surveys of teachers' views
- Pre-service teachers' feedback
- Public responses to the Summit

Official statements

- ‘Zero tolerance’ rhetoric (mainly from politicians)
 - “There is no place for illegal drugs in our schools. We will continue to suspend and expel students as part of this zero-tolerance approach” – Queensland Education Minister Cameron Dick (May 8, 2011)
- In UK: aim of new policies is to “unequivocally restore adult authority to the classroom”

Surveys of teachers

1991:

- Discipline needs to be imposed on students; it is something that 'happens to them' rather than developing internally. Schools must be tougher and have higher expectations and standards (Female Primary Teacher, aged 42)
- Benevolent dictatorship works with a tough class (Female Secondary Teacher, aged 37)

Surveys of teachers

2011:

- Schools need to be given **more power to punish** students who continually interrupt teaching and others' learning. (Female Primary Teacher, aged 35)
- I believe that **harsh penalties** are vital to preclude any other would-be offenders from doing the same thing. (Male Secondary Teacher, aged 29)

Surveys of teachers

2011:

- In my experience most students **want to be controlled** and guided by an adult. It gives them a sense of security, even if they don't realise that fact until they are much older. (Male Secondary Teacher, aged 54)
- Most teachers are just **trying to keep control** and manage to keep a lid on student behaviour. (Female Primary Teacher, aged 53)

Media reports


School naughty corner and disciplinary suspensions in schools may be human rights abuses, say South Australian academics Dr Anna Sullivan and Professor Bruce Johnson

Tim Williams Education Reporter

The Advertiser, July 9, 2014

Responses to reports

- 1000s of responses nationally
- 90% critical, hostile, and derisive
- Vast majority called for 'more discipline', 'more control', and 'more sanctions', and less talk about 'children's rights', and 'soft' responses to 'unruly behaviour'

 Reinforced 'hard', 'authoritarian', 'zero tolerance' talk as the dominant discourse about behaviour at school

Why?

- Accounting for the persistence of authoritarian responses to student behaviour requires an appreciation of:
 - the macro level influences on schooling in neoliberal times
 - as well as an understanding of the micro level pressures that impact on teachers at the school and classroom level.

Macro level pressures

National 'reform' agenda that emphasises:

- 'standards' (for teachers, students, and principals)
- high stakes, mass standardised testing
- common curriculum frameworks
- 'transparent' comparisons between schools (and teachers) in the interests of accountability, competition, & 'choice'

Macro level pressures

We need to acknowledge the power of social and political forces in **framing** debates about student 'discipline':

- more competition
- more control
- more standardisation
- more accountability
- more public scrutiny

Conservative values

Old school values are attractive:

“They stand for discipline, respect for authority, academic achievement for its own sake, scholarship, goodness and common decency. Way back in John Howard's prime ministership, he was roundly condemned for having the temerity to articulate old school values. Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Education Minister Christopher Pyne reflect the Howard era values. And why not? They work.”

Christopher Bantick, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6th June, 2014

Micro level pressures

The day-to-day routines and ways of 'doing schooling' are a more visible and tangible source of influence on teachers' views about 'managing' student behaviour at school

- 4 pressures on teachers

The 'ecology' of the classroom

- classrooms are crowded spaces in which many things happen at the same time, sometimes unexpectedly, and within the gaze of many onlookers
- teachers need to **manage** space, time, learning resources, learning activities, assessment & reporting, people

The 'ecology' of the classroom

- However, the need to structure the learning environment is sometimes equated with *controlling* student behaviour
- The logic behind managing the learning environment is applied to controlling students

Teacher folklore

Shared wisdom – passed between teachers

- ‘be consistent’
- ‘make things interesting’
- ‘focus on the immediate and tangible’
- ‘keep ‘em busy’
- ‘be tough early’

Thus, key ‘rules’ about how to respond to student behaviour become securely preserved in teacher folklore. To act differently risks not being seen as a competent teacher.

Accountability

Teachers respond to these pressures by:

- increasing their levels of surveillance
- increasing demands for behavioural compliance
- reducing student choice
- increasing their use of teacher-directed, didactic teaching methods that rely on high levels of teacher control

Deficit thinking

- Shared explanations of student behaviour attribute blame to perceived deficiencies in the student, and/or family
- Students are often described as 'lazy', 'naughty', 'oppositional', 'poorly disciplined', 'inattentive', 'violent', or 'bad'

Deficit thinking

Tendency to ignore the impact of systemic factors on behaviour like

- classroom and school level influences
- trauma
- poverty

Too deterministic?

- This analysis of the pressures on teachers to 'toughen up' and 'take control' of student behaviour may sound overly deterministic
- Yet some teachers and school leaders manage to resist these practical and policy pressures to enact more humane and civilised ways of relating to students in school

What do they do?

- Focus of Anna Sullivan's paper this afternoon!
- Report on what 5 local schools do when they 'do behaviour well'
- Shows that schools can enact positive behaviour policies in a coherent way to support students
- Leaders and teachers can and do interrupt dominant traditional discourses about student behaviour

Summary

My job was to open our conversation about student behaviour at school by:

- identifying the most common, most influential, and most popular ways of talking about behaviour
- analysing what macro and micro 'pressures' contribute to their dominance
- briefly flagging the possibilities of re-thinking how schools 'do behaviour well'