

Chapter 2

Daring to Disagree About School ‘Discipline’: An Australian Case Study of a Media-Led Backlash

Bruce Johnson

Abstract In this chapter, I discuss the challenges associated with mounting deliberately provocative knowledge mobilisation strategies about student behaviour at school. I present a case study of public responses to provocations in both traditional media and social media. I identify (a) the types of responses posted, (b) the relative frequency of these types of responses, and (c) some of the key strategies that were used to discredit the academics, educational leaders and child advocates who promoted anti-punishment approaches to dealing with student behaviour at school. I express my concerns about conducting meaningful debates about student behaviour in the media in Australia. These concerns arise because of the pervasive influence of conservative values in the media and wider society about children and their status, and a widespread willingness to trivialise and sensationalise the issues associated with children’s rights, in particular by notoriously outrageous ‘shock jocks’ on talk-back radio and some television networks. These revelations present academics and researchers with a difficult choice between taking further reputational risks by continuing to engage in public debates about how schools deal with student behaviour, or withdrawing to the safety of academia away from the derision of an increasingly sceptical and hostile public. However, I argue that we *have* to ‘dare to disagree’ and ‘answer back’ in sophisticated and effective ways if we are to change public opinion about what are considered appropriate ways to respond to children’s behaviour at school.

Introduction

According to Levin (2011), mobilising research-based knowledge involves getting the right information to the right audiences at the right time. He also maintains that publicly funded researchers have a responsibility to engage different consumers of

B. Johnson (✉)

School of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA, Australia

e-mail: bruce.johnson@unisa.edu.au

research in ways that maximise the impact of educational research on policy makers, teachers, leaders and learners. When educational research involves industry-based collaborators in the research enterprise, issues of knowledge mobilisation become even more complex and vexed. But what if teachers, school leaders, policy makers and parents do not want to hear about research that challenges their deeply held beliefs about children and how they should be treated at school?

In the Behaviour at School Study we made a commitment to communicate the findings of our research in a variety of forms and through different media. We endorsed Reid's argument and conviction that

Education which renews the public can only thrive in a civil society where there is healthy, lively, respectful and informed discussion in the public sphere about education policy and practice. Research, produced by educational researchers and drawn on by the public, education practitioners and policy makers should inform discussion in the public sphere as well as policy and practice. (Reid 2013, p. 292)

We also accepted Mortimore's (2000, p. 20) strong advice to educational researchers to 'fight for our values', including:

- respect for evidence
- respect for persons
- respect for democratic values, and
- respect for the integrity of our research actions.

As a consequence, we produced traditional technical reports (Sullivan et al. 2013, 2014), refereed papers (Sullivan, Johnson, Owens and Conway 2014), a website (www.BaSS.edu.au), articles in professional magazines (Mayo 2014), and 'opinion pieces' in the print media (Sullivan 2014a). We also organised a major public event to engage a wider audience in debates about how students are treated at school – a national summit entitled 'Behaviour in Australian Schools: Current Trends and Possibilities' was held in Adelaide in July 2014 (see Chap. 1).

Preparing for the National Summit on Behaviour in Australian Schools

Reid maintains that, 'as individual researchers and as a collective ... we [should] more systematically seek ways to connect our research to discussion in the public sphere ... This is a complex task demanding some carefully crafted strategies' (2013, p. 294). In the case of the national summit, it involved developing a raft of well-planned and strategic actions designed to engage the public and policy makers by:

- raising difficult questions about student 'discipline' at school
- providing evidence – rather than anecdotes – to help develop answers
- generating new knowledge to inform policy and practice, and
- declaring what we think are respectful ways of dealing with students.

One of our most strategic actions was to identify key researchers, educational leaders and child advocates who were prepared to do these things during the summit and, importantly, to respond to media requests for interviews and comments about their contributions. Those who agreed to contribute included:

- the Australian National Commissioner for Children
- the Chief Executive Officer of Principals Australia Institute
- the Executive Director of Catholic Education, Western Australia
- two South Australian school principals
- seven senior educational researchers from four Australian universities.

We consulted with, and received the support of, the seven ‘research partners’ that were associated with the Behaviour at School Study, including the South Australian state education department which provided financial sponsorship for the summit.

We contacted key office bearers of teachers’ unions and professional associations who are often contacted by the media about educational issues. We shared our ‘key messages’ with them and encouraged them to enter the public debate using traditional and social media.

Finally, we enlisted the support of our university’s media team to write and disseminate media releases Australia-wide using their established networks and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. All in all, we were well prepared to initiate and engage in a major public provocation about ‘discipline’ practices in Australian schools

What Happened?

Prior to the national summit, the convenors released a media statement that said, in part, that ‘there is a growing international public and political debate around the issue of student behaviour in schools that focuses on children’s rights’ and that the summit would look at the issues ‘in a human rights context’ (University of South Australia 2014). Both convenors were subsequently interviewed by a local newspaper reporter who wrote and published a front-page article in the *Adelaide Advertiser* (a newspaper with a weekday circulation of 170,000). The headline was ‘NO MORE NAUGHTY CORNER: Discipline at school compared to abuse of human rights’ (Williams 2014a). The ‘story’ was then pursued by multiple media outlets across Australia, resulting in a classic ‘media spike’ the next day (see Fig. 2.1). Based on audited media outlets – press, internet, TV and radio (iSENTIA 2014) – around nine million Australians had access to the ‘story’ in a variety of forms on 10 July 2014.

Contributors to the summit were in demand to speak on radio, appear on television, and to provide further comments to print journalists and online forums. Most were quite willing and prepared to adopt what Orr calls an ‘advocate and activist’ role to ‘push awareness about an issue’ (2010, p. 24) through active engagement – and provocation – with the media.

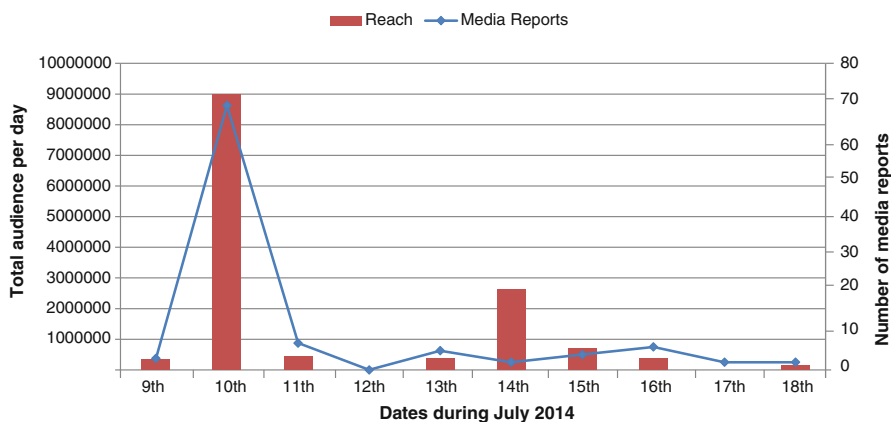


Fig. 2.1 Media reports and audience reach during ‘the provocation’ about behaviour at school

The key ‘messages’ that were delivered during this time can be summarised in the statements by participants in the summit (see Table 2.1). As these ‘messages’ were being disseminated via traditional media outlets, links to online forums, Facebook pages and other social media platforms provided opportunities for members of the broader community to become involved in public debates that were stimulated by the national summit. This occurred when contributors to the summit were interviewed or reported on radio (76 times), television (17 times), in print (11 times), on websites (57 times), and on combined print and websites (50 times). The subsequent social media responses were telling, with thousands of comments varying in length from a few words to paragraphs of mostly vitriolic abuse and criticism. Clearly, the key messages that were promoted by the academics, educational leaders and child advocates involved in the summit were roundly rejected by those members of the public who used social media to vent their opposition.

What follows is an analysis of the social media responses to the appearance on a national television program of one of the contributors to the summit.¹ Within an hour of the broadcast, more than 1100 responses were posted on the program’s Facebook site in response to the following provocation:

Is removing a naughty child from a classroom a breach of human rights?
 [A] behaviour expert ... believes that it is creating a bigger problem.
 ‘Removing kids from their learning environment is not a way to properly discipline.’

This case has been selected for analysis because it is typical of many cases on social media that were generated by and linked to traditional media stories about the issues raised at the summit. It demonstrates how vulnerable academics are to reputational damage when they provoke debate about controversial issues like children’s rights

¹The academic and the television program have not been identified here for ethical reasons. Identifying information that could have led to the identification of the academic has been removed from quotations used in the chapter.

Table 2.1 Key ideas from the National Summit on Behaviour in Australian Schools

Contributor	Key idea	Source
Sullivan	‘If you respond with interventions like time-out, exclusions or suspensions, it isn’t going to help fix that problem and if you continually remove kids from their learning we are wondering if that breaches their right to an education.’	Bird (2014)
	‘Attempts to control or punish the student do not address the underlying causes for a student being disengaged and ultimately may not change that behaviour.’	Sullivan (2014b)
	‘We argue that if teachers gained a greater understanding of the broader ecology of the classroom and how it can influence engagement and therefore behaviour, we might see a shift in focus to engagement rather than punishment.’	Sullivan (2014b)
Johnson	‘You build relationships with kids, you treat them fairly, you talk to them a lot, you don’t cause an escalation over minor things [and] you negotiate with them.’	Williams (2014b)
Mitchell	‘Schools have a responsibility to create an environment which respects the inherent dignity of each child, including when dealing with behaviour issues, but which also protects the rights of all children to an education.’	Williams (2014b)
Down	‘Instead of suspending students for being disruptive, schools needed to be re-designed to allow children to study things they found “worthwhile and interesting”.’	Hiatt (2014)
Slee	‘If you want to affect student behaviour, the more you work on improving the quality of teaching, learning and engaging with the curriculum, and have decent surroundings for young people to be working in, there will be a much better effect than using punitive disciplinary sanctions.’	Bird (2014)
Graham	‘International experts on school discipline have found that exclusionary responses to student misbehaviour – time-out, suspension, referral to separate settings – are ineffective because they do not address the underlying causes of disruptive behaviour.’	Graham (2014)

and school discipline. More importantly, though, it shows why research-informed debate about the key issues is needed to counter the ‘dominant discourses’ of punishment that justify the often unfair treatment of children in schools.

A Case Study of a Social Media Backlash

‘Venting’ on social media is common and, to some extent, is a behaviour that is accepted within online communities (Chmiel et al. 2011; Runions 2013). Anger and hostility about perceived social problems can have a contagion effect as users express their feelings and ‘instil a similar sense of outrage among other members of their online community’ (Shaer 2014, pp. 1–2). Some researchers have also implicated the ‘online disinhibition effect’ to explain why some ‘people say and do things

in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world' (Suler 2004, p. 321). The relative anonymity and invisibility of many online environments may contribute to this 'disinhibition'. This was the case with many of the blog sites that promoted mostly anonymous exchanges on the issues. Yet in the case under discussion here, nearly all of the contributors to the online discussion had Facebook identities that could be easily accessed by clicking on their profile thumbnails that accompanied their comments. In this sense, the discussion was a public event whose many contributors were willing to 'vent' their opposition to the academic's ideas and to question her integrity, credibility and reputation. They did this using a number of strategies and techniques that constituted a 'gratuitous campaign of ridicule and misrepresentation' (Quinn 2007, p. 4). These strategies included:

- portraying university researchers as out-of-touch theoreticians whose views should be discredited and rejected: 'Academics are idiots.'
- simplifying and extrapolating the views of researchers to frame them as dangerous extremists who threaten the accepted social order: 'Creating a false dichotomy.'
- recycling traditional justifications of the use of punishments to control children: 'Punishment works.'

I will briefly demonstrate how these strategies were used to attack and discredit the academic who appeared on national television to promote the 'key messages' emanating from the National Summit on Behaviour at School.

'Academics are Idiots': Playing the 'Anti-intellectual' Hand

The strategy most frequently used to discredit and demean the academic involved the application of vitriolic and scornful labels that positioned her as an unreliable 'fool', 'idiot', 'moron', 'do-gooder', 'fruit loop', 'activist', 'Muppet' and 'Australia's biggest joke'. Coupled with these pejorative labels were unsubstantiated claims that the views she espoused were the root cause of deteriorating standards of behaviour in the current generation of young people. The following comments are typical of hundreds that abused the academic and blamed her for 'our kids ... running amuck in society'.

You're an idiot! Full stop. It's people like you that are creating a generation of children and young adults that think they have the right to behave any way they please.

Yeah let's take away more discipline, the world is just getting worse and worse ... you wonder why so many are off the rails? It's because of idiots like this! Discipline is required!

She is a moron ... Bloody so called Do-gooders! Sod off & let the teachers do as they will & teach, & if that means removing a student to do so, then so be IT!!!! Butt OUT!!! You are what is wrong with this world u idiot.

It's fruitloops like you ... spewing your pathetic dribble that those moronic puppets we have running our education department/schools will suck it up as gospel.

A related strategy invoked the power of caricature and parody to dismiss the views of those who were seen to be 'too theoretical', 'out of touch', 'lacking practical experience' and 'fakes'.

These experts are full of unrealistic theories that are so distant from the real classroom!!!!

Obviously never been inside a classroom!!!! As a teacher, this makes me so mad!! What a load of crap!

This [person] ... needs to spend time in a classroom and actually see what the teachers have to put up with everyday.

Get real ...! Clearly you have not stepped foot inside a classroom since the cane was abolished. Again, just another academic sitting in an ivory tower with no bloody idea.

I would like these so called experts who live in ivory towers come into the real world and apply their strategies in a real classroom.

These so called experts should spend a day or two in a classroom and see how they cope with children who are constantly disrupting.

The positioning of the academic as a discredited 'expert' resonates with a central feature of Australian anti-intellectualism that constructs 'the expert voice as distant, questionable and opposed to the authentic voice of direct personal experience' (Glasson 2012). As Glasson continues,

The tension is between the forms of evidence the respective groups rely upon: the 'distant' evidence of educated rationality and the 'direct' evidence of personal experience, emotion and physical proof. Such an opposition is evident in the recurrent trope of the expert opinion being no better than – and maybe worse than – that of the person in the street. (2012, p. 106)

There is also a strong link between anti-intellectualism and the construction of 'the expert' as an authoritarian entity who seeks to impose his or her 'solutions' on other people's problems. Hence the many references to 'political correctness', 'interference', 'nanny state', 'thought police', and calls for 'so called experts' to 'piss off'

Seriously, I'm tired of hearing from these experts ... don't do this, don't do that. Go and get a real job that isn't trying to interfere in other people's lives and let parents be parents whatever way they seem fit.

All these 'experts' need to shut the hell up. All this cry-baby PC needs to stop. If a kid is being bad get a belt and whoop their ass.

Oh for god's sake. Pretty soon we'll be leaving it to the kids to teach them selves. Nanny state. In my opinion we need to bring back the cane to teach little shits discipline. Stop cotton balling younger generations.

What next? Piss off you uneducated fool and start living in the real world.

Creating a False Dichotomy

The second most common strategy used by the viewers of the TV program involved championing the rights of teachers to teach, and the rights of students to learn, over the individual rights of all children. They used the rhetoric of 'rights' to flip the debate away from children's right to have discipline policies and practices in schools

that respect their human dignity (Article 28 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child), to focus on the collective rights of teachers and students to teach and learn. These arguments appealed to ‘common-sense’ notions about what constitutes the ‘common good’ for the ‘majority’ (Glasson 2012) compared with the ‘extreme’ calls of children’s rights advocates who focus solely on individual rights.

Asserting the collective rights of ‘good’ students over the individual rights of ‘naughty’ students established a false dichotomy that glossed over the complex negotiations and compromises that are needed to accommodate the diverse needs and interests of students at school. Such ‘either/or’ thinking promotes the belief that there are only two possible positions to take on this issue, rather than many. For example, teachers constantly strive to satisfy the needs of individual students in classroom contexts designed for large groups; they mostly know how to balance the competing demands of individuals and the needs of the collective group. Unfortunately, many of the contributors to the social media discussion pursued a strategy that limited the debate to two extreme and seemingly mutually exclusive positions: either *for* the rights of individuals and *against* the rights of ‘the rest’, or *against* the rights of non-conforming individuals and *for* the rights of ‘the rest’. By describing their opponent as a proponent of the first alternative, they effectively positioned the academic as an extremist who did not accept or understand the needs of the ‘majority’. Their intention was to marginalise and discredit the academic and her views. This is clear from many of their comments:

How about the ‘Rights’ of the kids who want to learn? Why is it always the Minorities that get the preferential treatment!!??

Yeh! Let’s take away the rights of the other students to learn just so we look after the rights of the disruptive ones!! What a joke!

This is total rubbish. What about the rights of the other children in the class? THEY have the right to learn without the disruptive behaviour of other children.

We are losing this next generation under a guise of human rights and illegitimate psycho-babble.

The contributors to the national summit have, on many occasions, talked about reciprocal rights and responsibilities when framing the debate about children’s rights and school discipline. They have consistently refused to be drawn into arguments that force antagonists to opt for an extreme position within a contrived binary. Their approach is relationships based and predicated on negotiation, conciliation and education, rather than rules, sanctions and punishments. However, conveying that view in the media is difficult as the quest for simplicity and ‘core messages’ can overwhelm attempts to engage in longer, more nuanced discussions about how to reconcile the sometimes-competing demands of individuals and groups in schools.

Finally, it is worth noting that, at the very extreme end of the debate, some of the social media contributors opposed *any* consideration of children’s rights. They viewed children as ‘over-indulged’, ‘precious’, ‘spoilt’ and ‘anti-social’ and accorded them little status in a society rightly dominated by adults.

Everyone has too many rights these days:

OMG, I am so over some of the ‘human rights’ opinions!

Children these days have far too many rights as it is. They are so disrespectful and most seem to have chips on their shoulders like the world owes them. Ever since all of these rights started to appear by these do gooders and children started being wrapped in cotton wool more and more, respect levels have just totally disappeared.

Human Rights and Psychology are to blame for the state the world is in! This everything goes ideology is the reason new generations have no boundaries!

Engaging these commentators in any serious debate about children and their rights is likely to be fraught with difficulties due to their extreme views.

Punishment Works

The third strategy used by some of the program's viewers involved making assertions that punishing children changes their behaviour. They promoted a very traditional view that children need to be taught what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' in the most direct ways through the application of chastisements ranging from a 'good kick up the backside' to exclusion from school. The following comments were typical of the pro-punishment protagonists:

Punishment is the only form of discipline. I'm sick to death of out of control delinquent children and adults. Turn back to what did work – bring back the smack. It's not as though it's required every day; it's the knowledge of the fact that it can be used that will bring the behaviour problem under control.

Kids need to learn right from wrong and that if you do something naughty you will be punished! Children need to learn about life and that they need to be held accountable for their actions!

Time out is appropriate punishment.

They need to bring back the naughty corner. And kids that cause trouble instead of getting rewarded (getting expelled so they sit at home, do nothing and relax) they need to get punished – clean up around the school, get double homework plus detention during recess and lunch.

Summary and Conclusions

The furore that erupted in the media over comments made by participants in a public summit about students' behaviour in Australian schools was unexpectedly vitriolic and disparaging. In one case, the main provocateur was criticised, scorned, ridiculed and demeaned by online contributors to a discussion about the use of 'time-out' as a response to 'naughty' behaviour. The responses demonstrated that public opinion was vehemently opposed to the reforming ideas of those who questioned the fairness and appropriateness of some forms of 'behaviour management' in schools.

The experiences of the academics, researchers, education leaders and children's advocates involved in the media exchanges associated with the national summit have been instrumental in galvanising their continued commitment to debate the

issues in public. Clearly, there is a need to engage the public in further discussions about children and their rights in society and in schools if advocates of reform are to garner the support that will be needed to implement much-needed changes.

Their experiences also confirmed what the summit participants knew to be the case before they embarked on their media-focused provocation of the issues: that different media ‘have a profound ongoing impact on education, and in particular through [their] influence on public debate, which increasingly frames the terms and parameters in which education policy emerges’ (Rawolle and Lingard 2014, p. 596). Undoubtedly, the power of the ‘fourth estate’ cannot be ignored by education academics and researchers who want their evidence-informed views to influence educational practice.

What we learned from our experiences was that a new form of journalism – what Rawolle and Lingard call ‘citizen journalism’ – has emerged as a powerful force that needs to be recognised and used to challenge regressive policies and practices. While the case study presented here focuses on the negative responses of social media contributors, there were some ‘citizen journalists’ who were more supportive of the views promoted at the Summit. Ott and Theunissen (2015, p. 101) suggest that, by engaging with these ‘loyal fans and supporters’, researchers can participate in synchronous, online conversations to respond non-defensively and positively to create ‘threads’ that promote their views. Such participatory strategies offer new possibilities to identify and build on the supportive voices in online debates. So, rather than just being aware of the growing social media responses to their provocations, future researchers have the choice to participate more actively in online conversations by making alliances with like-minded co-contributors.

The final lesson that we learned from this case is that ‘daring to disagree’ about how to handle children’s behaviour can be a risky and dangerous business for academics because of the personal assaults on their credibility and reputation that follow. Academics who choose to enter the public domain to challenge and debate important social and educational issues need considerable personal and institutional support to weather the tribulations that they will inevitably encounter. One outcome of the national summit is a proposal to establish the Media Centre for Education Research Australia in 2016 to nurture and promote further engagement with the Australian public on educational issues. This is a positive outcome of what was a bruising but necessary process of publicly ‘disagreeing’ with the way some children are treated in our schools.

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