



Tegan Taylor:

Think back to your schooling days. How naughty were you in class? And if you were naughty, is that a word that you bristle at now? Or you may be mucking up because you felt anxious, overwhelmed, masking a bigger issue that you couldn't name yet. Teachers and schools are constantly trying to figure out the best way to handle challenging behaviour and one of the tools is suspension. Well, one in five students in New South Wales has been suspended from school and new research shows that being excluded not only affects academic performance but mental well-being as well. So when is suspension the right option? Is it ever the right option? And in our overworked and under-resourced school system, what is the alternative? Tell me if you were ever suspended in school, what impact did that have on your education or your self-esteem? You can send me a text 0418 226 576. I would really love to hear your suspension story. With me is Professor Kristin Laurens from Queensland University of Technology's School of Psychology and Counselling, who was part of this research. Kristin, what did your research find?

Kristin Laurens:

Well, Tegan, we followed 72,000 students over a 10-year period, so following them from grade 3 to grade 10, and we tracked their experiences of suspension and expulsion over that 10 years. And we did find that 19%, so one in five children were suspended at some point in that 10 year period. And in fact, most children were experiencing repeat suspensions. So 61%, three in five children didn't just have a single experience, they actually had multiple of these experiences.

Tegan:

You're the expert. When I heard these numbers, I thought it sounded like a lot. What was your initial reaction?

Kristin:

Yeah, we were quite shocked because each year the Education Department in New South Wales as well as others around around the country, publish how many children are suspended or expelled each year. And that's typically in the range of about four or five percent each year. But this was the first time that we had actually followed children over time. So rather than looking at a single year, now we're looking at that accumulation of experiences that kids have over their schooling journey. So over the 10 years, it was 19% of children.

Tegan:

What do we know about the kids who were more likely to be suspended or expelled?

Kristin:

Yeah, we certainly saw the over-representation of certain groups of students amongst that. So boys were more likely than girls to be excluded and so were children growing up in disadvantaged areas, children growing up in disadvantaged homes. So if you had parents who were unemployed in the past 12 months, your risk of these experiences were higher. Likewise, growing up in regional areas or remote and very remote areas of New South Wales children were more likely to be represented in these statistics. And it became more and more pronounced the more these experiences happened.



So boys, for example, were twice as likely as girls to be suspended just the one time, but were about 10 times as likely to be excluded 16 times or more compared to girls. So it's pretty stark at those numbers, yeah.

Tegan:

You are going to hear in a minute from someone who was suspended from school and is now trying to work on the other side of that and from a principal about what it looks like on the ground in the academic setting. But Kristin, from your data, could you see what the reasons were?

Kristin:

And I think that's something that sort of shocked us the most, I guess, is that, you know, four in five of these suspensions, 83% of them were actually being used for the two lowest levels of behavioural infractions. So here we're talking about continued disobedience, so disrupting the class, you know, annoying the person sitting next to you, or aggressive behaviour. And that's things like breaking your fellow student's property or, you know, disrupting... Sorry, verbally abusing teachers or students. So we're not actually talking about things like physical violence, illegal behaviours like bringing a weapon school or drug use or something like that. These are the fairly low-level behaviours that, you know, schools really should be equipped to manage day to day.

Tegan:

I do want to dig into that with our experts in a minute. So you are listening to Life Matters here on ABC Radio National. I'm Tegan Taylor, the voice you've been hearing is that of Professor Kristin Laurens, who's behind some new research looking at the prevalence of suspensions and exclusions, expulsions, getting expelled from school across the schooling life and finding that about a fifth of students have at least one suspension across their school life. Well, Mark Jackson is a youth worker at YMCA. He leads a programme working with kids who are disengaged with school. But Mark, this is also a pretty personal story for you.

Mark:

Yeah, thank you, Grace, and thank you for having me on the show. I'm really glad to have the opportunity to share my own experience, but I also wanted to share a little bit about the programme that we run, if that's okay. So we really believe that the suspension system is actually broken and that there is a huge need for an alternative programme for these students who are suspended or at risk of suspension to break that cycle of behaviour. And so that's why we've set up this alternative suspension programme. It's actually been running for 20 years in Canada, but we've been delivering it for three years in Australia across New South Wales. And it really provides an alternative option for these young people, you know, that previously would have just been suspended and gone home and done really not much productive, you know, activity. But now we can actually sort of identify what the issues are that are happening at school, the challenges that they're facing, you know, maybe undiagnosed, you know, difficulties, and then work with the school to overcome those barriers. So it's really exciting, like me personally, you know, having been through that experience myself and then being able to work with these young people and them overcome those challenges that they're facing is, you know, I just absolutely love what I do. And there's such a huge need for it. We only deliver for different sites across New South Wales at the moment because, you know, due to



funding, but really we'd love it in all the schools across New South Wales. Like we have students travelling, you know, 40 minutes each day to come to the programme because they recognise the value in it and obviously there's huge need for it.

Tegan:

Mark, how does your experience inform this work that you're doing?

Mark:

Yeah, absolutely. So I guess my experience, you know, schools are different. When I was at school, they didn't have the wellbeing teams they didn't have the support that they do now, which is amazing. But I still think that there is more that we can do. And that's why I really love what I do because, you know, my experience, you know, I had a lot of anxiety at school and that was exacerbated by, you know, the suspension system. And so if I can stop that, you know, from happening for these young people and actually, you know, break that cycle and give them those skills or, you know, confidence that they need. You know, I've had one young person who wasn't attending school for 12 months and then we worked with her to overcome that anxiety and then she's back in the system and attending, you know, regularly. So it's really exciting to see that shift and that transition. But, yeah, as I said, like my experience really informs that as well, because I have been through that myself. I actually, my dad was a deputy principal at my high school when I was suspended. So that's one of those stories that I tell these young people so they can kind of be like, oh, well, this, you know, this person's been through this and then they're more likely to listen, which is great.

Tegan:

With your, when you were suspended as a kid, did you feel like it helped? You know, was it sort of shocking you out of being naughty or was it sort of like, oh, yeah, that sounds about right, that sort of self-fulfilling prophecy?

Mark:

I'd say the first time I was, you know, shocked and it, but then, you know, after the second or third time, it's sort of like it's just going through the motions and, you know, you just look. It almost starts a bit of a downward trajectory of behaviour because you've got that negative reinforcement and you just kind of accept that that's how it is. Whereas, you know, when we work with these young people, we want to focus on the strengths and the skills and try and break that cycle because it I think it does become a cycle. And we've noticed that with our programme as well. We have young people coming back into the programme you know, and it may take a couple of times, but we can work with them to actually overcome that and break that cycle.

Tegan:

One text says, "our neighbour's kids are suspended regularly. It just seems to mean more time stuck with parents who aren't coping and don't know how to support their kids to learn more social behaviours." Well, also here with me is Angela Falkenberg, who's the President of the Australian Primary Principals Association. Angela, welcome to Life Matters.



Angela:

Yeah, thank you.

Tegan:

So from a school's perspective, when is suspension an appropriate response?

Angela:

So all systems have suspension as an option and, you know, rarely is it a first call. There are things that will happen along the way and, you know, I was interested when reflecting on what we call low-level behaviours, you know, disruption. But I think in the context of a classroom when you've got, you know, 30 children wanting to be engaged in learning and concentrating and children are continually calling out, you know, some quite curious examples of children who bark, you know, and it gets attention because it's a great strategy. However, the ongoing disruption is really problematic. There are conversations saying, you know, children can be moved, teachers move closer to them, all of the basics of behaviour management. But at some point, it's a sign, you know, a suspension can be a sign to say, right, we need to do something different. You know, we need a partnership here, we need to understand what's going on. And I loved hearing about Mark's program, because that intervention is really critical, but not all schools have access to those resources.

Tegan:

Kristin, with this layers of behaviour, it's really hard for a teacher who is dealing with this sort of thing. Can we offer some alternatives based on the research?

Kristin:

Yeah, I think we can. And I think what's critical here is that we recognise with the repetition that we can see in our data of these experiences, this is not working as a solution. So we have to have these evidence-based alternatives that you can equip teachers to use. Now, for many students, given that it was fairly low-level behaviours, you know, that's your programs like Positive Behaviour Management, but fundamentally teaching kids the social and emotional skills that they need to manage their behaviour and engage with their learning effectively. But also thinking about really integrated support. So what is causing the behaviour in the first place? Now, you alluded to that earlier. It might be that the kid is actually struggling academically, and this acting out is a result of not being able to engage with the learning. And so taking that whole-child approach and really thinking about, can we support this child academically, behaviourally and social emotionally and really integrating that in a tiered sort of model so that all children are learning, you know, social and emotional skills that are going to help them manage in the classroom. And then you deliver targeted or intense supports for kids that need more support. You know, in previous research we've done, we've seen that kids with emotional or behavioural disabilities are overrepresented in these statistics. So are children that are engaged with the child protection system, kids that have been maltreated. So they're going to often need more complex kind of supports around them. So it's equipping teachers with the time, with the training, with the resources and support to actually manage a lot of this behaviour in the classroom and not push the kid out. We've fundamentally got



to teach kids the skills that they need to be able to manage because they're going to go out and be our next generation of citizens out there.

Tegan:

Angela, listening to that, I don't think any teacher would say no to more support. What are schools resourced to be able to support their teachers in this way?

Angela:

Well, certainly the social emotional learning is a key part of the Australian curriculum. We call it the personal and social capability continuum. So that is part of everyday practice. But what we're talking about here is that intense support, and schools are not supported to or funded to have that level of support. So you can rely on a teacher assistant, you might have some short term funding. If they have a diagnosed disability, that might attract some additional funding. But what schools are overwhelmed with are children who need that level of intense support. And, you know, in my experience, and I'm no longer young, so it's quite long, when we've had partnerships with families, things have been able to be worked through. And absolutely understanding the cause of behaviour. Sometimes it is poor sleep. And children have had support through working with the GP around sleep hygiene. Sometimes it's hunger, and that's why schools now offer a range of breakfast programs and emergency lunches. But the intense support, additional resourcing is required. A classroom teacher cannot offer that level of intense support.

Tegan:

You are listening to Life Matters here on ABC Radio National. I'm Tegan Taylor and I'm with Angela Falkenberg, who's the President of the Australian Primary Principals Association, Professor Kristin Laurens from Queensland University of Technology, and Mark Johnson who's a youth worker, talking about suspensions. When are they appropriate? What kind of effect do they have on students' lives? What are our alternatives? One person says, "My son was suspended in year 10 and dropped out. He never wanted to go back to school again. The situation was badly handled by the school. No proper support was provided for him to return. It affected his college attendance and he didn't go to university until his early 30s. Another related issue is that schools should be more diverse. There's no choice for different educational styles to meet the needs of a variety of students." Well, Mark, when you were having trouble at school, there was a counsellor who helped you see things differently. How important was that person for you?

Mark:

Oh, absolutely. Like it was really key for me to, you know, overcome those challenges that I was facing. And I know now, you know, it was an undiagnosed autism situation. But she, yeah, she really took the time to, and I was fortunate because, you know, we only had one counsellor for the whole school. So I was very, you know, lucky to have that time with her. But it really, you know, gave me the skills and tools that I needed to make that change and make that shift. So I'm very, very grateful for that. And, you know, I wish that, you know, every student could have that, but that's not, you know, that's not realistic. But yeah, it was definitely very, very, you know, effective for me in that way.





Tegan:

And your son's also had challenges at school. How have you been able to support him through that?

Mark:

Yeah, so his experience has been a bit different to mine. I think the school, I mean, he's very lucky to have a very supportive school. They've been instrumental in getting his diagnosis and everything. But I feel like the reintegration process was a lot better. You know, we met with the teachers and, really spoke and talked through what had happened and how to know, move forward and put in some strategies in place. And that's what we try and do in our programme as well is, you know, when these students go back to school, we don't just sort of throw them back in. We meet with the teachers, we meet with the parents and really set them up for success, essentially, and give them those strategies and tools to use when they've re-entered the school.

Tegan:

Yeah, let's talk about this re-entry thing. Angela, you want kids to be engaged at school. What are the strategies that schools can use to transition kids back into the classroom after they've been suspended?

Angela:

So certainly the suspension gives space for schools to plan and particularly if it's been an of violence against other students, pardon me, the other students get a space as well. But at the re-entry meeting, a plan is set up. So, you know, understanding the behaviour, what might have been causes, thinking about, you know, where the student might be located in the class. Are they with a buddy who can give them that quiet feedback on the side? For some students, a full day can be really problematic. So you might build in some time out, which often was with the principal in a kind way, you know, activities to do. They might be supported to plan what play they'll do at lunchtime. If entering a game is problematic, they might have designated older student, you know, if they're a young student that they can go to for help. And many of the older students, even in primary, are trained as peer supporters. So you're understanding that child and their behaviour because every behaviour has its own antecedents and its own complexities. So it needs to be very personalised. It can be exit cards so that if a child is feeling overwhelmed in the classroom, they can give a card to the teacher which says I'm going to a designated space for 10 minutes for a bit of cool down. There's lots of strategies, but it is that personal approach to what the child needs.

Tegan:

Kristin, with the data that you've got, what works to keep kids engaged once they re-enter school?

Kristin:

Yeah, look, I would argue let's keep them there in the first place. You know, with 83% of our suspensions in this data set happening because of that continued disobedience or aggressive behaviour, you know, I think those aren't necessarily the kids that are up in those higher tiers needing that intensive intervention. If we can deliver stuff to the whole school and and really, you know, upskill kids to manage in the classroom, I think it's going to prevent the movement of children



up those higher tiers. So, you know, some of what Angela was describing where kids have spaces in schools where they can go, let's put them in place proactively rather than reactively so that child doesn't actually get pushed out of the school. And, you know, all of the psychological sequelae and stigma and self-perspective, like Mark was talking about, the impacts of that suspension on them are avoided.

Tegan:

Well, Mark, Angela, Kristin, thank you all so much for joining me. Professor Kristin Laurens is from the Queensland University of Technology's School of Psychology and Counselling. Angela Falkenberg is the President of the Australian Primary Principals Association and Mark Johnson is the Alternative Suspension Coordinator at the YMCA in South West Sydney. And thank you for your stories as well. Em has texted in saying, "what about the higher level behaviour where they threaten other children? The effect on the victims. When the school manages the child at school, this can increase the mental effect on the victims. The victims can get overlooked." Another says, "ex-teacher, your expert is correct, but what she's missing is students who cannot behave in the classroom, hate being in class, and it's cruel to keep them there. Support programmes are loved by all teachers but they're rarely available and often defined soon as they are defunded, as soon as they make some inroads. Students who are not ready to learn need to be given the time and space to develop those skills, but not in the classroom and not until the student wants to be there."