

Equity Matters Disability Symposium – Presentation Notes

Preamble – There are many definitions of what is meant by having a ‘disability’ and what is equity. They are terms we all understand but are hard to pin down. For this work, I have summarized what I think disability means below.

Disability

To be deemed a disability, the impairment or condition must impact daily activities, communication and/or mobility. They can be a result of:

- DNA malfunction
- Physical trauma
- Early childhood neglect or abuse

Equity is a more contentious issue. Some, always those with the least need interpret this as everyone getting the same. I’m confident that the rest believe it involves everyone getting what they need. Equity for this work is simply defined below.

Equity

We invest in resources that support all children with all disabilities to:

- Achieve their authentic sense of value
- Exercise their right to take a place of equity in their communities
- Access all opportunities that are available to others

Let me introduce you to ‘Craig’, well introduce might not be the correct term let’s say remind you of ‘Craig’. Craig, – it is a real name and could as frankly been Steve, Kylie or Ted, I guarantee someone with that name behaves just like Craig. He is a thirteen years-old student at ‘Smithville House’ public school. He is currently on suspension for ‘inappropriate behaviour’!

Craig is on suspension for the following ‘inappropriate behaviour’; he was late to class, claims he didn’t hear the bell. When his teacher asked him how come everyone else did, he shrugged and sat down in the back row.

Now ‘Craig’ knows he has a seating plan and should sit down the front and his long-suffering teacher told him to move. Craig refused! The teacher’s frustration got the better of him and he started to yell at Craig demanding he move to his allocated seat. Of course, ‘Craig’ yelled back, challenging him to force him there; to make him shift.

The teacher then told Craig to get out and report to the Head Teacher, again ‘Make me’ was the reply. Another student was sent to get the Head Teacher who duly arrived. The Head Teacher told Craig to come with him to the office. ‘No’ said Craig now simmering with anger and looking about in a threatening manner. The Head Teacher left to get the Deputy who was considered the ‘authority’ in the school.

After asking nicely, the DP tried raising his voice and finally placed his hand on Craig's shoulder to ease him out of his chair. The reaction was immediate and ferocious; Craig leapt up, kicked his table across the room and on his 'way out' punched a hole in the wall, all the time hurling abuse at whoever was in his way.

Instead of going to the office Craig left the school.

I have followed a lot of Craig's in my career and I can tell you more often than not, when these kids are alone they cry their eyes out. Eventually, unless someone hears those cries and intervenes this crying stops, they give up and then lose their humanity.

The DP went back to the office, shaken and upset trying to work out what to do next, try to follow him, ring his mother, or tell the police he had gone?

The school rang the mother who answered 'what's he done this time' and when told he had run off she told the school not to worry he would come home when he settled down.

The principal had been out of the school and when she returned she filled in the suspension forms and arranged for 'work' to be sent home.

The HT, the teacher and the class eventually calmed down and normal conditions resumed.

This scenario occurs in just about every comprehensive school; in some it is a rare event in others it occurs almost weekly and I might add that in the scheme of things this level of behaviour is nowhere near the most difficult situations schools face. Every year students, teacher, school executive will be physically injured by students with severe behaviour and more than this they will be psychologically damaged. Just because Craig won't - can't do as he is told.

The conventional perception of a disability is linked to children who have been incapacitated through events that have been an unfortunate, natural slip-up. That is, the typical journey through foetal development and early childhood evolution ensures we are equipped with the means to successfully navigate through life.

From the moment of conception our genes divide and combine, driven to conform to a template locked in our DNA. We become humans because our parent's genes are 'human'. Frogs become frogs, ants become ants. The meticulous adherence to the pattern coded in the DNA assures that diversity between humans is insignificant compared to the differences between species. This conformity is remarkable when you consider how much the DNA of all species has in common.

There are a small group of children who, as a result of some mistake in the reading of or fault in their DNA during prenatal development do not have that normal journey to infancy. These kids are born with an atypical set of physical attributes that make it hard to fulfil the purpose of genetic existence. Things like cerebral palsy, multiple-sclerosis or muscular dystrophy are examples of physical disabilities, while Down Syndrome results in both physical and intellectual disadvantage. Add to this the normal distribution of intellectual abilities that establish some children with extremely efficient brains, those with high IQ's with the corresponding number with an IQ so low they are unable to understand the world as clearly as those at the median.

Another group of disabled children who through some accidental trauma have a reduced capacity to perform the expected human functions expected for their age. Children, such as those who have been blinded by some accident or have suffered a physical trauma to their spine becoming paraplegic; these are just some of these 'accidental disabilities'.

These kids receive our compassion, and support albeit not at the levels they require. Their disability is recognised as not being their fault but what about Craig? I will concentrate my discussion his type of disability not only to highlight the costs of providing the specific support for his disability, not just the financial costs but the loss of human capacity, for the individual and for all of society.

Craig was born into and raised in an abusive and neglectful environment. The treatment he endured as a child shaped the way he responds to life's challenges. The high levels of stress associated with the abuse has produced a significant level of physical brain damage that act to overwhelm any attempt by him to control behaviour. The abuse has caused the part of his brain that identifies a threat, his amygdala to become enlarged and super-sensitive to perceived threats while other parts that help him control his behaviour and learning, his frontal lobes, hippocampus and cerebellum are decreased in size and effectiveness. The abuse literally damages his brain.

The neglect he experienced denied Craig the stimulus required to develop new pathways. Our genetic blue-print prepares specific parts of our developing brain for the formation of a neural pathway that controls a particular skill. That is, when at the time of learning to see, the part of the brain responsible for this is prepared to build the network by learning to interpret light. Additional materials such as myeline, the material to lock in the new skill is increased in that area of the brain. This is wasted if there is no stimulus. A dramatic example of this occurs in children who are born with cataracts over their eyes. Because the light can't get in, the neural pathways can't develop and so these children are effectively blind. They remain 'blind' even after the cataracts are removed because once the designated period of neural formation has passed the brain removes the unused material in

an attempt to increase its efficiency. We can't go back and replace the neuronal matter required to build a 'seeing' network.

The example of sight formation is a great illustration. The telling feature of this problem is that because of the lack of stimulation the materials that would be used to form the neural pathways are removed. This removal or 'pruning' occurs all through childhood. Sadly, for traits like attachment, when children do not get the appropriate nurturing stimulus as a child, the usual scenario in these neglectful families the child carries a life-long impediment regarding the formation of future relationships.

This significant absence of stimulation is at the heart of neglect. In extreme cases the neglect can be quite extensive, for example the children abandoned in the Romanian orphanages. In other cases, the lack of stimulus could be in specific areas. In all cases the deficit in stimulus will result in a reduced cognitive capacity leading to dysfunctional behaviour.

It is important to remember the brain makes no judgement about the ethics of the behaviour only how effective it is to make use of the immediate environment to get their needs met. For the children at the core of this work, the abusive and neglectful characteristic of their developmental environment leads them to acquired behaviours that are inappropriate in functional settings.

Because Craig learned to survive in a toxic world the behaviours he developed are entirely unsuitable for school that functions in a different way. Craig still wants to get his needs satisfied but in the school environment the actions he employs, his go to behaviour won't work. In fact, the mismatch between expected consequences based on past experience of specific actions can have a contrary consequence.

A cruel complication is the continued failure produces high levels of stress associated with the rejection he will almost invariably suffer precludes any cognitive approach available. The elevated stress drives him to his most entrenched behaviours, those learned in early childhood, those that triggered the initial rejection.

The thing is this brain damage is not the result of a fault in the DNA driven development nor of an unintentional accident but is the result of the treatment he received as a young child. His disability is the outcome of the deliberate and targeted actions of the adults in his life. Like all disabled children, it is not his fault but Craig attracts very little sympathy or support. We deal with the Craig's by excluding them!

So, we are dealing with a significant group of children who:

- Have significant brain damage
- Are vulnerable to elevated levels of threat
- Have entrenched behaviours that not only clash with functional society, the expression of these behaviours repulse and threaten members of that environment. Instead of evoking compassion for these damaged kids their behaviour push well-meaning people away from them
- Their behaviour damages the physical and psychological wellbeing of other members of their community

In recent times the number of children being referred to authorities because of neglect or abuse has increased significantly either because it is becoming more frequent or people are more willing to report. But, it is beyond dispute too many of our children suffer trauma or neglect and a significant number of these will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) a debilitating condition that requires long-term therapy. Statistics vary about the proportion of the population that suffer PTSD but estimates range from 3% up to 11%. This applies to the children we are discussing which means that up to one in ten who develop in a toxic environment will have the disabilities that come with this disease!

If the statistics are right then in a school of 600 students you could expect between eighteen and sixty-six children suffering from PTSD and in a class of 30 students between one and four students suffer from this disease; and it is a disease.

This picture assumes that the abuse/neglect is evenly distributed across schools and society, it is not. However, there is a strong correlation between the socioeconomic standing of a community and its' school and the instances of abuse. An impoverished area will have a higher concentration of 'abuse casualties' and it has been estimated that in some communities as many as 23% of kids suffer PTSD. For our model school this means as many as 138 students are damaged and seven in each class.

So, how much does this neglect of dysfunctional behaviour due to abuse or neglect cost?

In our detention centres these statistics are worrying. One report found that 92% of children detained had suffered multiple traumas. It is little wonder these kids are major problem for society. The Craig I discussed eventually left school unable to get employment and during a drug fuelled brawl killed another youth. He is currently serving a life sentence. The long-term outcome is not only devastating for Craig, the youth he killed, the family and friends of that boy but also the cost of having him in goal.

The high proportion of students with behaviours associated with PTSD in specific populations such as schools, special schools or those schools in very low socioeconomic areas almost guarantees high levels of behavioural problems.

However, apart from the mandatory inquiry that follows a high profile violent incident that grabs the attention of the media little else is done. The finding of these reports remains in bureaucratic records and nothing changes until the next crisis occurs. Then the cycle repeats. Historically, there has been no significant changes in practical support especially in the communities that suffer the most and so teachers and other personnel are left to their own devices to deal with these problems.

In the state of NSW, in one year over 30,000 students were suspended, over half for a long period of time. Although not all of these children will go on to have a 'career' like Craig's there is evidence that Craig is not alone. The behaviour of these children prevents them from fulfilling the 'normal' functions of other kids who complete their schooling. Indeed, their behaviour is described as dysfunctional, they can't function properly and so it follows that they are or should be considered disabled.

The current practice for dealing with students with extreme behaviours is to exclude them. This can be as a suspension, exclusion or expulsion from school. A more permanent solution is to incarcerate them in juvenile detention centres or adult gaols. It is obvious that the cost to provide these containment facilities is substantial. In fact, it would be frightening to consider the complete cost of containing these children who have a disability.

We are operating in a neoliberal environment where everything is measured in monetary terms. As always, the way the economic rationalist see improvement in those areas they are forced to operate is to either privatise or cut costs. As a result, we get institutions such as the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre where circumstances were so bad a Royal Commission was established to investigate the appalling conditions. The call for such a high-level inquiry bears the hallmark of most government's response to difficult problems, get a report but sit on it. If they implemented the conclusions it would increase the costs enormously and so nothing changes until the next outburst which will inevitably be followed by another review!

The pay-off for early intervention for these students is well known. A review for Greater London Authority in 2011 compared the \$125,000 cost to the public for each child who develops severe conduct disorders, with \$1,000 per head on parent training programs that can reduce the incidence of such problems in the first place.

The economic returns are greater than the costs to provide remedial strategies later in life, such as adult literacy programs and convict rehabilitation. Between \$2 and \$17 can be saved

for every \$1 spent on effective early childhood interventions, based on figures published by the RAND Corporation.

Another cost is the inevitable segregation of these children from their community. The argument for integration has been strong but the case for exclusion seems to be a constant battle and this is best illustrated using behaviour as a test case. Ever since the concept of integration has been rightfully accepted there has been a continual flow of academic reports about how suspension and or expulsion for kids with extreme behaviours is ineffective and really immoral.

There is a more, subtle form of exclusion and that is in the growth of private schools. The political adoption of parent choice regarding the school their children attend has seen some parents taking their children out of their local public school and enrolling them in a private school is not only that they are better resourced these schools are marketed as places where dysfunctional behaviour is not tolerated. It's true that, in the main these school refuse to enrol difficult kids regardless of their disability but particularly those who are disruptive.

There is a more subtle but significant long-term cost to the community. While these students behave in such dysfunctional ways at school they rarely reach their learning potential, neither do their fellow students. This loss of intellectual capital and the subsequent productivity impedes the development of the state's economy.

However, there is another cost that is best highlighted by examining the impact of the behavioural disability has on the school environment. This was highlighted by Professor John Hattie in what I would call his seminal work.

Professor Hattie has conducted a meta-analysis of over 500,000 studies examining the influences on student's learning achievement. He has produced a series of 100 factors from the most significant to the least.

The four most influential factors cited are:

1. Self-report grades
2. Absence of disruptive students
3. Classroom behavioural (*conditions*)
4. Quality of teaching

It is significant that the second most notable influence on student learning, the absence of disruptive students is ignored in teacher training documents and the impact these students have on the third factor is discounted. The presence of disruptive students is a significant factor in the creation of the classroom conditions.

The current presentations of Hattie's results, in Department of Education training documents have eliminated any reference to these factors claiming only student feedback/preparedness precedes the quality of the teacher. This dismissal would be indefensible in any other rigorous academic work yet it is accepted in the largest education authority in the Southern Hemisphere.

Reasons for the denial of the demonstrated influence of the classroom environment and the presence or not of disruptive students can only be the subject of speculation however the author suspects that these problems are politically toxic, they are extremely difficult to address and raising these issues does not enhance anyone's career prospects. Yet any practicing educator who works in schools knows only too well the real significance of Factor 2 and Factor 3.

In work carried out for the Secondary Principals Council the author explored the time taken to deal with student's dysfunctional behaviour. Using the only state-wide statistic that would give some indication of the distribution of the problem, suspensions data an index was calculated using the relationship between Long and Short-Term suspensions and the results of a survey amongst principals about the time taken to deal with each suspension. At the same time the principals were asked to estimate what proportion of the work they did in regards to dysfunctional behaviour that was specific to suspensions. The following describes that computation:

- To deal with the average suspension takes 3.2 hours (results from survey)
- For 115 (the total number for Holsworthy High) this equates to 368 hours per year.
- Work on suspensions is only 14% of the total time spent on behaviour management by senior executive of a school (results from survey) the hours become 38,600 for the year or 68.9 per week.
- If this is divided equally between the three, each spends 22.9 hours each week dealing with behaviour issues.
- If this work were applied to one deputy and principal the time would become 34.5 hours each.
- Students spend only 30 hours each week at school (discounting after school detention) all three are spending half our pupil time dealing with behaviour management issues.
- For two senior executives, it becomes 86% of their time.

The figures cited above reflect the impact on actual educational practices at the senior executive level at Holsworthy High. It would be fair to assume that the amount of time taken away from other educational tasks would be for all teachers.

The table below shows the average rate for each Region and the hours of work, based on the index 21.5 times the number of LTS will calculate the hours per week spent on student

welfare and discipline. The table below provides these hours for the highest and lowest time demands on districts within each Region, that is the data from the Department was aggregated for Districts and these were compared, highest to lowest within each Region.

	Average	Hours	Maximum	Hours	Minimum	Hours
Hunter	2.5	53.8	3.9	83.9	1.7	36.6
Illawarra	1.6	34.4	2.1	45.2	0.8	17.2
New England	2.9	62.4	4.4	94.6	1.7	36.6
North. Coast	2.5	53.6	3.5	75.3	1.7	36.6
North. Sydney	0.4	8.6	0.5	10.8	0.3	6.5
Riverina	2.2	27.3	4.1	88.2	1.1	23.7
SW Sydney	1.5	32.3	2.2	47.3	0.9	19.4
Sydney	0.7	10.5	0.5	10.8	1.2	25.8
West Region	2.7	58.1	5.8	124.7	1.5	32.3
West Sydney	1.3	28.0	1.8	38.7	0.6	12.9

From these observations, it is seen that one District in Western Region would require 124.7 hours per week just to deal with student welfare issues. This equates to more than three executives doing a 40-hour week just addressing this problem. Contrast this to 8 hours of work demands for one senior executive in one district in North Sydney. The implications for the attention that can be focused on other mandated duties are obvious.

The distribution of the problem is not homogeneous across the state but the support services offered, such as counselling services are broadly based on enrolment numbers not need. The contention that this inequity is addressed in the current funding formula has some validity but the real cost and the actual availability of appropriate personnel resources is another matter.

The reality is society does not provide anywhere near enough support for all the disabled community and the relatively small amount it does provide certainly doesn't trickle down to the kids who act the way these children do.

The current political/market driven approach to the problem of students with a disability restricts any solution not only to monetary terms but linked to the political cycle of three to four years. As such, there is little appetite to really address the problem.

What is required is a complete refocus to this problem – instead of seeing the allocation of resources to deal with a disability as costs, imagine if we could see it as an investment! When you commit to investing in real resources to deal with the troubles resulting from neglect and abuse in early childhood you could limit the acquisition of dysfunctional behaviours and reduce the level of brain damage that impacts on the future. That is, we would have less need for the tools of containment that deal with behaviours associated with

the illegal behaviour that is associated with this disability. In pure monetary terms, it is cheaper to pay for support in early childhood than pay for the legal and prison systems that inevitably follow the levels of neglect and abuse we now experience.

But beyond these monetary savings would be the positive addition to the social wealth of our communities. When I consider those students, I have come into contact with who have suffered early PTSD I inevitable get a glimpse of what might have been. The real crime is ours, not only those who inflicted the disability onto the child but those of us who failed to lend a hand. The punishment for our crime is we live in a world that has been denied the gift of so many talents.

So, I call on all of us to look to the investment in resources that support all children with all disabilities to achieve their sense of value, their right to take a place of equity in their communities and their right to access all opportunities that are available to others. When they win those rights we all win a better society!