



# MAKING EDUCATION WORK FOR OUR MOST CHALLENGING STUDENTS: THE 'HOW' OF INCLUSION

An International Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship.

**PAUL ROBERTS**

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# 1. Acknowledgements

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The Fellow sincerely thanks The George Alexander Foundation for providing funding support for the ISS Institute and for this Fellowship. In 1972, George Alexander AM (1910 - 2008) set up an independent philanthropic Foundation as a way of sharing his wealth and giving back to the community. Today, the focus of The George Alexander Foundation is access to education for promising young people, particularly students with financial need and those from rural and remote areas.

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It was an honour to be supported by the sponsor and awarding body to pursue professional learning in an area of passion and be able to connect with people all over the world to learn, grow, and share knowledge. Special thanks to Nick Johns and Wendy Draayers for supporting and helping to shape the Fellowship plan and report.

The schools and people visited as part of this Fellowship were incredibly generous with their time and knowledge which continues to influence and shape my thinking. This Fellowship Report aims to capture my learning from these passionate and phenomenal individuals. The schools and people visited are listed:

Seattle School for Boys, USA	Nick Creach, Founding Head of School
Renton Academy, Seattle, USA	Travis Hall, Principal Michael Stufflebeam, Classified Manager
Aspire Academy, Hull, England	Chris Mulqueen, Principal
Spartans Academy Alternative School, Edinburgh, Scotland	Douglas Samuel, CEO Emma Easton, Teacher
St Paul's High School, Glasgow, Scotland	Lisa Pierotti, Headteacher, and her Nurture team.
Glasgow Education Services, Scotland	Jenni Kerr, Nurture Development Officer
St Keyna's Primary School, Keynsham, England	Megan Morris, Former Principal
BANES Virtual School	Dr. Alish Rodgers, Educational Psychologist
Emotion Coaching UK	Dr. Janet Rose, Co-founder
Attachment Research Community	Dr Richard Parker, Trustee
Thomas Tallis School, London, UK	Ashley Tomlin, Principal Deputy Head
The Difference, London, UK	Shaun Brown, Programme Director Kiran Gill, CEO
Dunraven School, London, UK	Mohamed Abdallah, Lead Practitioner: Student Welfare and Engagement
Mental Health by Design, ThriveNYC, USA	Kelli Peterman, Prevention and Community Support Specialist
Brooklyn Academy, New York, USA	David Genovese, Assistant Principal Linda Noble, Teacher and Project Lead
The Island School, New York, USA	Elayne Fernandez, Outreach Coordinator
Lakeside School & NeuroLogic, Philadelphia, USA	Joshua MacNeill, Director of Neurologic Kathy Van Horn, Executive Vice President Brian Dager, Vice President of Student Services
Mastery Charter School – Shoemaker Campus, Philadelphia, USA	Sarah Gentry, Social Worker

The Fellow is particularly grateful to Shaun Brown (The Difference) and Dr Alish Rodgers (Banes Virtual School) for their investment in the project and the connections they provided to schools and people who helped with this project.

Many thanks to family, friends and colleagues who continually encourage, challenge and show support.

## 2. Executive Summary

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Every child deserves a rich and meaningful education. For some students, the challenges schools face with addressing their social and emotional needs get in the way of them engaging with their education. To better equip educators to serve these students, the fellow set out to observe and learn from practices across the United States and the United Kingdom, looking for approaches that could be used in the Australian context. Sites visits to mainstream and alternative school settings and organisations that support the sector, as well as conferences and interviews were employed to gain knowledge and exposure to ideas and experience from people and organisations considered leaders in this area.

The learning from this fellowship is broad and encompasses approaches within classrooms, across schools, and sector wide. In classrooms, multiple settings implemented approaches to facilitating student self-regulation throughout the day. The fellow observed calm classrooms with consideration for the physical environment, visual prompts and classroom lay-out. Crucially, settings that catered for our most challenging students ensured their curriculum was engaging and relevant to the students.

At the schools visited, relationships with students were positive and purposeful, behaviour was taught rather than punished, and short-term interventions were implemented to address student skill-deficits and social-emotional needs. The fellow saw examples of teacher practice informed by knowledge of how the brain works, and schools that valued teaching students about this too. Organisations visited demonstrated how teaching our most challenging and disengaged students can begin to be viewed and developed as a specialisation, and how effective cross-sector collaboration can have definitive impact when committed to over the long-term. Underlying all of these practices and initiatives there was recognition that it is the staff and their practices that create the positive outcomes, and therefore the health and wellbeing of these staff is paramount to their success.

The fellowship has led to personal growth, improved teaching practice and increased motivation to develop local school systems to become more inclusive for our most vulnerable students. Recommendations have been developed that the fellow believes will lead to better outcomes for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

### Recommendations

1. Regulation strategies need to be part of the school day
2. Schools must create restorative systems, not just restorative conversations within punitive systems.
3. Schools need to develop a Relationship Strategy outlining the 'why' and the 'how' of positive, purposeful teacher-student relationships.
4. The system needs to acknowledge the specialist skills of teachers for disengaged students.
5. Teachers need brain education, and so do students.
6. Partnerships between community agencies and schools need to be more strategic.
7. Schools need to develop and implement their own short-term interventions

# 4. Fellowship Background

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## Fellowship context

The Fellowship aimed to answer the question:

“How can mainstream schools create meaningful and sustainable inclusion of students with significant emotional and behavioural difficulties?”

Across a range of school settings, difficulties are faced by teachers when students are unable to regulate their own emotions and behaviour. A disproportionate amount of teacher time and attention is spent attempting to manage and minimise the impact of these behaviours, rather than investing in meaningful learning experiences. These challenges can contribute to negative student-teacher relationships, as well as the disengagement and potential exclusion of these students.

The 2017 report by the Victorian Ombudsman set the challenge to the sector to address the issue to reduce expulsions from government schools:

‘The behaviour of these children may be extremely challenging, but it must be within the power of our education sector to support these children rather than simply shifting the challenge of the student’s behaviour from one school to another’ (Ombudsman 2017, p. 4).

In addition, the report noted concerningly that there was an overrepresentation in expulsion cases for students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, students with disabilities, and students in out of home care. This indicates that it is likely the barriers and challenges within our system that prevent our most vulnerable and disadvantaged students from thriving within our schools. We know that disadvantaged students are more vulnerable to school exclusion, that exclusion rarely ‘fixes’ student behaviour and that it increases student

vulnerability (YACVIC, 2016), as well as increasing the social and fiscal costs to our community (Lamb & Huo, 2017). Collectively, we need to adapt and problem-solve to ensure we create meaningful inclusion and preventative approaches that truly cater for our most challenging students social and emotional needs. We need our schools to enrich the learning experiences of our students who are most at risk of poorer educational outcomes to build opportunities to thrive within our education system and consequently in their post-school life.

This Fellowship sought to identify and observe established practices internationally and learn from those who are implementing them. The aim is to develop those practices, initiatives and ideas for application within the Australian schooling context.

At the time of writing, education institutions around the world are being forced to create remote and online learning opportunities as schools are closed due to a global health pandemic. While this report does not explore the topic of remote and online learning, it is worth acknowledging its opportunities and possibilities for students who struggle to manage themselves and engage in classroom-based learning all day, every day. Future exploration of this topic may pair well with the findings of this report.

## Fellowship methodology

In order to investigate practices and see them at work the Fellow visited a range of settings to observe and discuss what they do and how they do it. In addition, the Fellow sought to experience the learning environments, thinking about what they look like, sound like, and feel like, to gain understanding of inclusive and calm learning spaces.

A variety of methods were employed including:

### **12 School visits**

Including primary, secondary and alternative learning settings

### **Classroom observations**

Meeting with teachers, support staff, students, and school leadership

### **Observation of two teacher training sessions facilitated by:**

- o The Difference
- o Dr. Alish Rodgers

### **Face-to-face interviews**

- o Jenni Kerr
- o Dr. Alish Rodgers
- o Janet Rose
- o Richard Parker

### **Attendance at three conferences**

- o Trauma Informed Schools Institute Conference, Rochester, MN, USA
- o Attachment Research Community Conference, Birmingham, England.
- o Youthlink Conference, Glasgow, Scotland.

## Fellowship period

The Fellowship was awarded in April 2019. Throughout 2019 the Fellow developed connections locally and internationally to identify the settings and practices to include in the Fellowship travel. The international travel component took place over five weeks in November - December 2019, undertaking Fellowship activities in the United States (Seattle, Rochester, New York City, and Philadelphia), England (Birmingham, Hull, Bath, and London) and Scotland (Glasgow and Edinburgh).

## Fellow biography

Paul Roberts is currently employed as a Leading Teacher within the Department of Education, in the role of Student Learning Leader at Berwick College, Victoria. He teaches in the College's flexible learning and applied learning programs and Humanities. He has previously led the wellbeing and learning support teams and their initiatives within the school, with the Wellbeing team named as finalists in the Education Support category of the Victorian Education Excellence Awards in 2017 & 2018. Prior to teaching, Paul was a youth worker in the community sector, working with homeless young people and young people in out-of-home care. His experience in the areas of youth work and education combine to equip him to work to develop practice in the provision of quality education experiences for our most vulnerable and challenging young people. Paul holds a Bachelor of Social Science/Youth Studies and a Masters in Secondary Teaching.

# 5. Fellowship Learnings

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The Fellow sought to identify practices inside the classroom, school-wide approaches, and system-wide solutions to support the meaningful inclusion of students with behavioural and emotional difficulties. The range of initiatives, practices, and learnings cannot easily be condensed into this report, with many elements that are not included here still having a great benefit to the Fellow's personal and professional development.

As expected, there was not one simple solution for working with our most vulnerable and challenging students, but rather a range of creative ideas and approaches that respond to the learning needs of the individuals in front of them. An overarching philosophy that seems to be a common thread in the most successful settings was what Janet Rose refers to as bringing together the 'caring' and the 'daring'. High care and support must be partnered with high expectations. Without 'the caring' some students simply will not be able to push themselves to achieve what they are capable of. Without 'the daring' we are selling some students short and not challenging them to reach their potential.

Interestingly, there was no consistency with 'names' or 'labels' for approaches or philosophies of inclusion. Different settings adopted language that resonates within their own context. It was noted that most labels that stuck more commonly had broad application such as 'inclusion' or 'nurture' or 'brain-based' that could be applied universally, rather than more specific terminology that relates to particular groups.

It was evident that there is always a tension between inclusion and responding to behaviour. Committing to addressing the needs of our most challenging students, whilst maintaining behaviour standards for the learning community can sometimes seem like an impossible mix. These two priorities do not need to be contradictory. By allowing them to sit in tension we push ourselves to continually be asking both 'am I meeting the needs of the individual?' and 'am I meeting the needs of the school community?'. It is in this space that some people are creatively finding ways to answer yes to both questions.

## In classrooms

### Self-Regulation

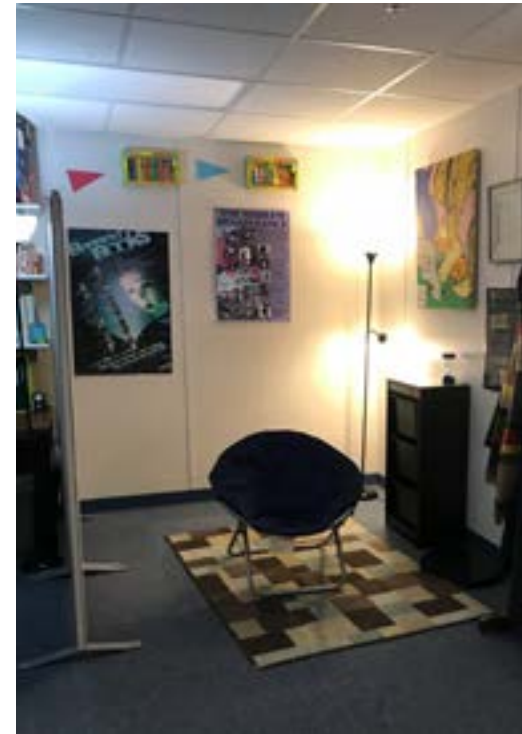
A common theme to aid the successful engagement of students with emotional or behavioural difficulties was the focus on supporting them to be able to regulate themselves. The schools visited engaged a range of strategies to maintain calm classrooms, promote self-regulation strategies, teach understanding of the brain and self, as well as ways to intervene when a student is dysregulated.

One of the most robust examples of incorporating regulation strategies into schooling was Lakeside School in Philadelphia. Lakeside School serves students who have been excluded, or at-risk of exclusion from mainstream school, as well as those who are struggling to engage with schooling in those settings. The Fellow heard and observed a range of ways that Lakeside teach, model and reinforce self-regulation for their students. From providing opportunities for movement and 'brain breaks' to playing music at 60 beats per minute to align with a regulated heart rate, it is the daily routines that make self-regulation an embedded part of their practice. Lakeside seeks to ensure all interventions are applied universally to help normalise support and reduce stigma. The extent to which students engage with various interventions is largely dependent on need as well as individual buy-in.



The school has a range of seating options in classrooms including standing desks, floor cushions, rocking chairs and couches alongside traditional chairs and desks. Every classroom has a 'regulation station' with tools that can be obtained to self-regulate while learning and listening. Students can access seating options, fidget or sensory tools, and opportunities for movement in every class whenever needed, and staff are encouraged to model their use. Through this, students develop greater capacity to regulate themselves and seek out the tools and spaces required to calmly engage with their learning. Dysregulated behaviours result in the student going to the 'resolve room' where students are facilitated through a process of regulating themselves according to their own personal preferences, as well as a problem-solving and restorative process. 'Pulse checks' are incorporated into their teaching of regulation so that students can get immediate feedback of successful self-regulation through measuring a reduction in heart rate. Tracking their heart rate point-to-point is a tangible measure of a successful intervention. Other strategies utilised included facility dogs for comfort and play, scheduling calm, rhythmic electives at the start of the day and an outdoor regulation space with activities that are rhythmic, sensory or physical. Despite most students of Lakeside being referred for behaviours that showed a reduced ability to self-regulate, upon visiting the school the Fellow observed a calm, engaged environment with students able to articulate their regulation needs.

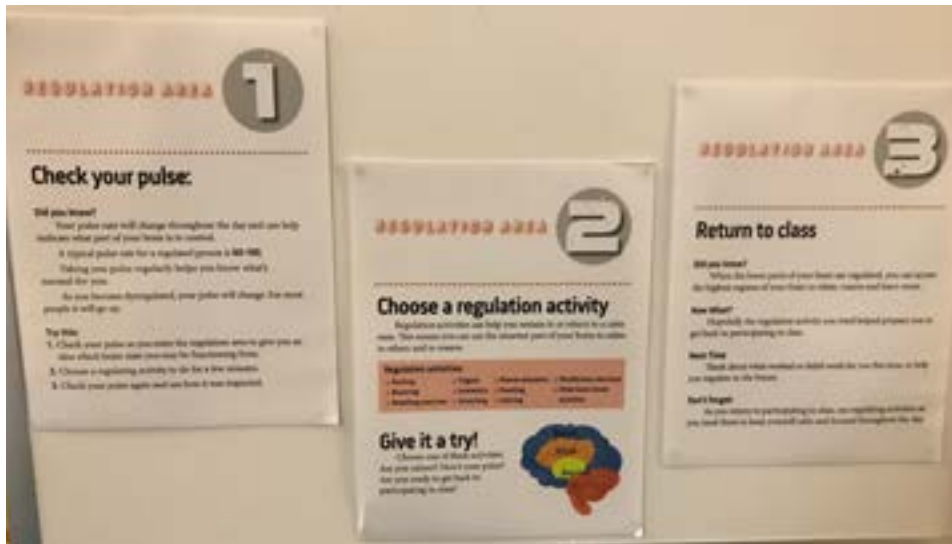
The role of the adult in regulating students was apparent throughout the Fellowship. In many of the settings there were designated staff that specifically respond to heightened and dysregulated students. It was commonplace for counsellors to be available either via appointment or at a moment of need. At Renton Academy, Behaviour Technicians were able to respond or redirect behaviour, their staff are adept at intervening early to prevent escalation. At the Island School, staff from their de-escalation team could come and assist in a classroom where a student is dysregulated and support is needed to help them in that moment, as well as reintegrating them back into the classroom learning environment at an appropriate point. At Spartans Academy Alternative School, youth workers are on hand to support students or provide movement breaks when they are fidgety or agitated but are integrated within their day for relationship-building and personal development.



One of Lakeside School's Regulation Stations

## Environments

It was beneficial to see the different environments that schools have created and the elements that help keep students calm, focused and engaged. With limited budgets, most schools are not able to build purpose-built facilities, instead creatively adapting their existing spaces. The physical spaces were diverse, but all made concerted efforts to create calm and flexible learning spaces.



Lakeside Pulse Checks

up with a 'PTO' (personal time out) space which could be a separate break out room, a quiet corner, or a beanbag. Rooms for small group interventions were generally light, often with relaxed seating options such as couches or beanbags alongside group tables and chairs. Kitchen facilities were common in these spaces creating the possibility of shared cooking activities, or just to ensure students are fed and have their needs met. Plants and greenery were seen across multiple schools, particularly in the spaces set out for the purpose of self-regulation or group spaces that needed to have a sense of calm. Throughout the schools visited student work was often proudly displayed, seemingly a visual symbol of success and accomplishment. Goals, values and positively framed behaviour expectations often adorned the walls, a visible reminder of what they were collective and individual seeking to achieve.



Brooklyn Academy's Mindfulness Centre

ThriveNYC's Mental Health by Design is a public health initiative in New York City, seeking to redesign underutilised spaces in schools for positive mental health outcomes. These repurposed rooms had a range of functions including audio booths, mindfulness centres, student lounges and restorative spaces. The Fellow visited the mindfulness centre at Brooklyn Academy, where mindfulness sessions are delivered within classes, as well as lunch times and weekends. The space was simple, without much visual stimulation, but felt light and calm. The lighting, greenery and light colours helped create a sense of calm and positivity, a view echoed by the students and staff during the visit. The Mental Health by Design initiative demonstrates how simple small-scale projects to shift the built environment can resource a whole school community to improve their mental and physical health.

Seattle School for Boys is a one-class school operating out of the basement of a church. The room has been set up so there are different spaces around the room with different purposes that align with their 'Challenge Cycle'. The room itself was light, with windows above head height which limited distraction. At Renton Academy, classrooms utilised the soft lighting of lamps, fairy lights and dimmers, avoiding use of fluorescent lights. Every room was set

## Engaging, experiential, authentic learning

The importance of an engaging, relevant and experiential curriculum cannot be understated. Student disengagement is clearly linked to underperformance (Angus et al 2010), and in order for our most vulnerable students to achieve their best academic outcomes the curriculum and educational program must be a focus.

As a new school, Seattle School for Boys chose to put the social, emotional and developmental needs of adolescent boys at the centre of their curriculum design. Neural education and social emotional learning were two elements of their program that acknowledge their social and developmental stage, while the emphasis on community engagement and experiential learning brought real-world, relevant learning experiences to the program. These experiences include reading to the elderly, designing magazines to display at the local bookshop, parkour in the park, cooking classes, and at the time of the Fellow's visit they were building a 'tiny house' for a homeless service. In conversations with students they identified these experiences as their favourite part of schooling.

Aspire Academy combined a vocational program alongside an academic program for all students, avoiding the practice of directing senior students towards one path. Their hair-dressing program has salon hours for clients, their mechanics course has a Go-Kart facility. Aspire have created international links, they know the benefit of students having a global perspective and becoming global citizens and have offered students the opportunity to participate in an international trip to China.



The Island School's De-stressing Corner

Social-emotional learning (SEL) was structured into many of the schools using a range of structures and resources to suit their setting. At Renton, every class participated in one session each day, while at Aspire they had a subject called 'Crucial Skills' encompassing the SEL objectives. At The Island School, the importance of SEL is emphasised through annual staff training at the start of the school year, visual reminders throughout the school, and consistent language to describe and undertake strategies to manage social and emotional challenges.

## In schools

### Relationships

Teachers broadly recognise the importance of relationships for the learning process and for managing the classroom environment. Our most challenging students are at greater risk of experiencing negative relationships with teachers (McGrath & Van Bergen 2014, p. 6), and when students experience this negative relationships they are more likely to continue to present with challenging behaviours (Mercer & DeRosier 2010). However, a positive relationship can have a range of by-products relating to the social, emotional and behavioural experiences of students (McGrath & Van Bergen 2014, p. 12)

The priority that inclusive schools put on relationships and emphasising the purpose of those relationships is what sets them apart. Dr. Bruce Perry was the keynote speaker at the Trauma Informed Schools Institute Conference and reinforced the importance of relationships as part of learning and responding to behaviour. He says the route to the cortex (thinking part of the brain) is relational and social. His advice in working with dysregulated young people is to first work with them to regulate, then relate, and finally reason. That safe, regulated adult is highlighted as having many benefits. Dr Bruce Perry says that the very best kind of reinforcement for children and young people is praise from a safe adult. He also points out that young people will only leave their comfort zone when they are safe, a requirement if students are going to take risks in their learning and push themselves to try things they are not yet confident in. After Dr. Margot Sutherland outlined the concerning statistics for people who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) in her address at the Attachment Research Conference, she identified the key antidote to ACES - an emotionally available adult.



Spartan's Academy Youth Work Space

Spartans Academy take a highly relational approach, with Youth Workers integrated in their schooling as an advocate and a guide, and all staff in the program showing unconditional positive regard. Emma Easton spoke about the value of showing 'dangerous vulnerability' as an adult role model, as the young people develop the ability to be vulnerable in a learning environment with their own learning and personal needs. Aspire Academy created avenues for relationship-building through activities every Friday afternoon, with students choosing from a range of interest-based options that create a space for students and staff to strengthen relationships through fun, engaging activities. Lakeside took a similar approach ensuring the start of the day was relational involving breakfast and relaxed activity. Relationships with families was also a regular theme. Lakeside, Spartans Academy and Aspire all had a strategy of regular intentional positive contact with parents and guardians, with many holding regular scheduled parent conferences. The positive partnership between school and home supports the challenging work of motivating often disengaged young people to their learning.

## Teaching rather than punishing behaviour

“Are we expecting a measured, calm and rational response that they haven’t learned yet?”  
(Emma Easton, Spartans Academy)

Most schools visited sought to teach behaviour, rather than punish it. Restorative approaches were common across the visited schools, with varying methods of implementation. At Thomas Tallis School ‘Reset meetings’ are held to move forward from incidents or issues taking a restorative approach wherever possible. At Dunraven College, the students undertook a reflective process with dedicated staff in their Referral Centre, with data collected to monitor that the behaviour did not re-occur after their time in the Referral Centre. Both of these schools also had the opportunity to refer students to more comprehensive skill-building through short-term interventions provided internally. At Lakeside, their ‘Resolve Room’ allowed for a facilitated restorative process and supported return to the classroom, whether the issue was with a peer or a staff member. Lakeside also have implemented an ‘Alternative to Suspension’ process for significant breaches of school community expectations. This alternative is focused on reflection and moving forward and involves four stages – regulation strategies, learning skills for similar difficult situations, academic reflection and skill development, and community service. This alternative process is facilitated by dedicated staff and students are accountable for their engagement in the process, with the ultimate aim to upskill the student and prevent re-occurrence of incidents without risking disengaging a student through a suspension process.

A common practice across different settings was the thorough collection of behaviour data. Each school had their own approach based on the staffing resources available to them. At both Renton and Aspire, they had staff members who work with the class all day and collect behaviour data as part of their role. In some schools they had points systems with most data collection related to a small number of whole-school expectations and the extent to which the student could independently adhere to those expectations. At Renton and Aspire, they held regular reviews of individual student data with the key staff involved with that class.

This data was analysed for the purpose of reflection and future planning. At Lakeside, a points system was in place, along with a range of complimentary data collected including how often students attend the ‘resolve room’, how long they spent in the ‘resolve room’ and even heart rate data was collated.

Goal	Plan	Y/N
To follow directions and be safe here and at Tiffany Park.	Take PTOs when frustrated	4 ☺
To follow directions throughout the day.	To follow TC directions after the first cue.	5 ☺
Get 2 or less stars in an academic low area.	Raise my hand and wait for permission.	?
To stay on task during academics.	To focus and not get distracted	10 ☺
Learn Renton Academy's rules & expectations.	Practice expectations and ask questions.	10 ☺
Take PTO's when frustrated.	Raise my hand and patiently wait to be called on.	A
Get 2 or less stars for area in academics.	Follow directions after the 1st cue.	☺
To be kind and focus on myself.	Be polite and get talking.	5 ☺
My safe, parent, and listen for the first cue.	Be safe with materials and follow directions.	☺
Learn the Puff Value Contract.	Lead Group when it is learned.	?

Renton Academy Classroom Goal Setting Wall

Importantly, the behaviour data was used to review student engagement in class, recognise trends, guide decision marking, and set goals with and for the student. The behaviour data did not lead to punishments, just problem-solving. Michael Stufflebeam and Travis Hall from Renton Academy highlighted that behaviour data also allows for objective judgements and responses. Too often students displaying challenging behaviours draw out emotional reactions from school staff. This can lead to decisions made that may not be objective, as well as difficulties recognising progress when small steps require heavy investment.

## Short term interventions in schools

Many of the schools visited in the UK had short term intervention programs built into their inclusion approach. This allowed for students to access support and develop skills to foster future success in the classroom environment. There were a range of approaches, often tailored to the schools needs and available resources but each had dedicated spaces, with staff for whom this was their primary role.

The Base at Dunraven College is a supportive intervention for students who have experienced difficulties with engagement, which may relate to personal circumstances, health, mental health or behaviour. Each student involved has an individualised program, with most spending part of the day in The Base, with a maximum of 8 students involved at a time. The Base, alongside a number of other inclusion strategies has led to a dramatic reduction of exclusions at the school. The Learning Support Unit at Thomas Tallis School provided varying levels of intervention for students identified through regular multi-disciplinary meetings. Individuals may spend periods each day in the space engaging in therapeutic or personal development projects as well as schoolwork over a six-week period. In addition, the unit holds group programs, and one-on-one interventions and counselling. They work on six-week cycles to align with their mid-term and end-of-term breaks.

Nurture Groups are an intervention that exist at schools across the United Kingdom. They seek to replicate the 'nurturing' role of a parent for targeted students within the school setting. Nurture groups seek to improve social and emotional skills through a combination of structured and unstructured activities, all guided by a trained facilitator. It has been evidenced that this skills development in turn has an academic benefit. At St Keyna's Primary School, 'Nurture Groups' occur at the beginning of the day for 30 minutes, with participants referred by their teachers. They also have a lunch time Nurture group that emulates a family meal environment. The Fellow visited St Paul's High School where Nurture Groups were created for younger students identified by key staff. The nurture program exists in conjunction with a broader school-wide 'nurture' philosophy, with all school staff practicing the six nurture principles in all areas of school life.

## Across the sector

### Brain Education for Teachers

Very early on in the Fellowship a theme emerged around the need to understand the brain. At Seattle School for Boys, the Founding Head of School Nick Creach said when a student's behaviour or presentation is not what was planned or expected he has begun asking the question "What does their brain need?". As teachers wrestle with trying to get students to change their behaviour, and to gain the knowledge and skills for learning this question moves you away from blame and frustration and straight into problem-solving at a very basic level.

Dr. Bruce Perry who spoke at length about the impact of trauma and stress on the students that we teach urged schools to become informed by neuroscience, not trauma. Lakeside School who have worked closely with Dr. Bruce Perry, identify their approaches as brain-based. They regulate, relate and challenge students through a neural education lens, recognising that understanding the brain is part of understanding and working with their students. They also endeavour to educate their students about the brain through their strategies and interventions, as well as a dedicated curriculum. The link between self-regulation and understanding the brain is explicit and becomes tangible for students as they practice it.

## Specialisation: Disengaged/vulnerable learners

“Teaching excluded pupils...should be seen as the ‘brain surgery’ of education. It is the hardest, most specialised work and requires the highest level of skills and training” Kiran Gill, The Difference (‘Educating the Excluded’, The Times, Nov 9, 2019).

A meeting with Program Director from The Difference, Shaun Brown, led to the Fellow attending one of their training sessions for their ‘Difference Leaders’. The Difference works to build the capacity of the system by giving passionate teachers experience in alternative settings, to then return to mainstream schools to cascade their knowledge. They have identified that this type of work is a specialisation, and are seeking to develop specialists in the field. The ultimate goal is to reduce exclusions from school by having teachers with the skills and understanding to work with the most challenging students.

In almost every school visit, school leaders identified one of the keys to making their school work was having the right people. These staff needed to know how to interact and work with students who will challenge them and frustrate them, and they have to patiently and calmly persevere to create the relationship and conditions that will bring the best out of the student. This is a practice and skill-set that is rarely recognised in a formal way, but is essential for the ‘brain surgery’ of education.

## Cross-sector collaboration

One of the key learnings from the Youthlink Conference in Glasgow was the many examples of collaboration between the education and youth work sectors. Initiatives were showcased that involved youth work agencies playing a key role in school communities, either in an all-encompassing support role, or in targeted projects to address a particular community need. These partnerships were strong, with shared governance over the initiatives and co-located staff.



Glasgow's City-wide Nurture Strategy

Edinburgh's Spartans Academy was an example of cross-sector collaboration and a community taking ownership over the wellbeing of its young people. Spartans Academy is a Football club that runs an Alternative School in its facilities, as well as providing youth workers and programs to the local schools. Douglas Samuel, CEO, meets with local principals regularly to ensure community needs are supported by the football club.

In Glasgow, they are seeing increased school attendance, lower exclusion rates, higher attainment and achievement, and an overall reduction in youth violence in the community. All of this has occurred through a cross-sector 'nurturing approach' involving health, law enforcement and education.

As one of New York City's 'Community Schools', The Island School has agencies and community groups invest in the school through supportive initiatives that makes the school a hub for meeting community needs. The school is open from 7am – 7pm as services use their space for various supportive initiatives for students and their families before school, during school, and after school.

## **Staff Health & Wellbeing**

Most importantly, to ensure all of the key ingredients to supporting young people can work, the staff involved must be looked after. Dr Bruce Perry says a dysregulated teacher cannot regulate a dysregulated child and is likely to dysregulate their students. He calls this relational contagion. Managing stress amongst staff is critical to an effective approach to young people who are dysregulated. The Fellow heard of daily reflective debriefs with small groups of staff at Spartans Academy and Lakeside School, with Lakeside also providing weekly individual supervision sessions to its staff. They emphasised that these debriefs and supervision always remained the priority. Regular staff training and professional development relating to attachment, trauma, behaviour, and regulation was referenced by almost every school visited.



## 6. Personal, professional and sectoral Impact

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The Fellow was personally enriched and encouraged by connecting with like-minded professionals in different settings and places around the world. This helped to re-affirm values and beliefs as well as shaping thinking in relation to the education of challenging and vulnerable young people. The Fellowship also gave direction for future learning, as different elements triggered interest in developing knowledge and practice in new areas, particularly neural education.

Professionally, the Fellowship opened up doors to network locally and internationally. This expanded professional network will assist in the development of practices locally, as well as providing models on which to develop personal practice. The new resources shared at school visits and learning from experts at the conferences attended, has developed knowledge as well as ideas for applying that knowledge. This new knowledge and experience can be applied immediately within the Fellow's current work environment and can be drawn upon in future professional endeavours. Most importantly, this process has built belief in his professional capacity to influence change in the education sector.

Through travel across England, Scotland and the US, the Fellow observed that Australia is well-placed to lead practice in the area researched. The education sector in Australia is fairly consistent nationwide meaning change and development is not as complicated as in other countries. Teachers typically take a relational approach with their students while schools are generally seen as structured and rigid, but not necessarily oppressive or punitive. Whilst education has not changed greatly in recent decades there are not strong ties to tradition, just barriers to overcome to create change. These conditions provide a platform for effective practice in the area of inclusive schools and meaningful education opportunities for young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

This Fellowship aims to inform, inspire and influence practitioners and leaders in the education sector and it is hoped that the recommendations that follow will prompt innovation and development and ultimately an education system that better serves all young people, including those whose behavioural and emotional presentations challenge us.

# 7. Recommendations and Considerations

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The Fellowship explored a range of strategies and programs implemented in the United States and United Kingdom, however it is evident that these approaches were developed within the sociopolitical context of their own countries. The learnings of this Fellowship leads to recommendations that consider how these strategies and approaches could be applied within the Australian context.

## 1. Regulation strategies need to be part of the school day

Australian school environments can be busy and at times overwhelming, with many transitions throughout the day. Students arrive at the school gate with different experiences of home, varying stressors and not all students have the skills to manage their own emotional or behavioural reactions to the school environment effectively. Many of the regulation strategies observed through this Fellowship and outlined in this report can be applied to any classroom, and any school, and are vital for teaching self-regulation and maintaining a calm, orderly environment in which all students can learn.

For this to happen, teachers need to be educated on the brain and regulation (Recommendation 4), school classrooms need to be resourced with tools and equipment to assist students to regulate, and school leaders and staff must be committed to allowing time to regulate with the knowledge that it will allow the 'learning' time to be more effective.

## 2. Schools must create restorative systems, not just restorative conversations within punitive systems.

Restorative practice is a familiar term in education circles in Australia, but commonly is manifested in restorative conversations occurring informally within largely punitive systems. Detentions and punishments as default consequences for all issues remains an easy and common way out with the aim of deterrence of repeated incidents. Restorative systems are intentional about making consequences a process that facilitate change and restoration. Restorative systems hold students accountable, whilst teaching and upskilling the student and preventing recurrence of the issue. It does not require wholesale change of school systems, but a recognition that each incident is different and can be responded to in different ways. School leaders need to commit to restorative approaches in a meaningful way, reviewing their traditional behaviour management policies to incorporate the teaching of behaviour and processes that facilitate change in behaviour. Student growth and development should be priorities in these policies above what is time-effective or least resource intensive.

### **3. Schools need to develop a Relationship Strategy outlining the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of positive, purposeful teacher-student relationships.**

In recognition of the important link between positive teacher-student relationships and student outcomes a more intentional approach to these relationships need to occur in schools. This is especially vital for our most vulnerable and challenging students. Relationships need to go beyond who teachers naturally and easily connect with and need to break out of teachers own individual relational lens. Schools should implement school-wide strategies to ensure teachers create relationships with their students that have purpose, as well as training teachers on how to build relationships with their most challenging students. For this to occur, school leaders need to develop formal school-wide approaches to teacher-student relationships that are reviewed regularly to ensure they are implemented universally and are meeting their purpose.

### **4. The system needs to acknowledge the specialist skills of teachers for disengaged students.**

Teachers tasked with educating our most challenging students are generally viewed as sympathetic and patient, rather than an expert or specialist in their field. The ‘brain surgery of education’ needs to be regarded as a specialisation, in recognition of the specialised knowledge involved as well as the breadth of approaches required to facilitate meaningful education with these students. This would require the professional bodies that register and represent teachers across Australia to acknowledge the specialisation through targeted professional learning, supporting pathways and development of teachers towards the specialisation, and the profiling of teachers who excel in this area. The tertiary sector can support this recommendation through increasing opportunities in both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching courses to learn the skills and knowledge required to equip teachers to teach in this area. Establishment of professional networks, as well as training initiatives such as ‘The Difference’ outlined in this report can help establish the teaching of disengaged students as its own specialisation.

### **5. Teachers need brain education, and so do students.**

The learning process takes place in the brain, as do the neurological responses to the stressors arounds us. The more teachers understand about the brain the better equipped they are to facilitate learning for all students, as well as manage stress reactions that manifest in challenging behaviours or emotional presentations. Increased brain education within our teaching education programs is essential for this recommendation to have far-reaching application. Schools are encouraged to facilitate professional learning opportunities with their current staff to educate them on the processes of learning in the brain, as well as the brain’s responses to stress and trauma. This will also equip teachers to educate their students to better understand their own brains and each other’s. Schools can utilise existing curriculum resources to educate students and can incorporate brain education into routines and conversations to help students apply brain education to their everyday learning experiences.

### **6. Partnerships between community agencies and schools need to be more strategic.**

Within the sector there is acknowledgement of the potential benefits of partnerships between community agencies and schools, however in practice there are often barriers to effective long-term partnerships. The effective partnerships observed in the Fellowship were driven at a governmental or department level, with commitment to the long-term, and with people employed to build and maintain those partnerships. Governments are urged to work together to better coordinate common aims, particularly between state education departments, and equivalent state departments responsible for health, mental health, human services and youth justice.

## **7. Schools need to develop and implement their own short-term interventions**

While there is always a chorus of people saying that some students will not fit into mainstream education settings, the current landscape suggests it is one of their best opportunities, particularly when they are below the age of 15. Schools have the opportunity to be creative within their own systems to provide alternate approaches for individuals who may need it, for the short-term or beyond. There is a need for some students to experience more intensive support, coaching, and upskilling particularly in the area of social and emotional development. Providing that support within the school environment gives the student the best opportunity for them to also apply the learned strategies or mindset to their education and the school environment. The visited sites provide examples of what this can look like, and the success it can achieve. For its success it needs to maintain a high expectation and high care approach within designated spaces and with specialised staff. There needs to be a strong commitment from school leadership, and a sharing of its philosophy with the broader staff. All schools could implement short term interventions to meet the needs of their cohort. Department of Education can support the recommendation by providing grants and training to help short term interventions launch, as well as networking and development opportunities to facilitate their continual growth in number and quality.

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