

# Prevention is better than cure

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The gnarly and persistent issue of disruptive classroom behaviour has raised its ugly head again. In September, the New South Wales (NSW) Government announced that it will be conducting an international search to recruit a behaviour specialist to advise on behaviour across all education sectors. At first blush it seemed like a welcome response to what appears to be a growing problem in schools. Things certainly seem to have deteriorated since I did my doctoral research in this area some 20 years ago. The OECD's 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that Australian students ranked 70th out of 77 participating nations on the index of school disciplinary climate. In 2009, Australia was sitting around the average for unruly classrooms. In the more recent statistics, students have complained about classroom noise and disruption, and classroom unruliness in general: a total of 43 per cent of them reported disorder in their classes, compared with an OECD average of 32 per cent.

Interruptions to in-class schooling through the pandemic have no doubt increased the challenges of disruptive behaviour for teachers and students. Some responses to the announcement have been to call for an increase in school counsellors in the system. While there is clearly a gap in direct services to children and young people who need psychological support, this is not the principal solution to the problem in my opinion. The well-worn metaphor of ambulances at the bottom of the cliff rather than fences at the top comes to mind.

The best way to manage disruptive behaviour is to prevent it in the first place.

In the same way that many teachers bemoan the fact that they have been ill-prepared to teach reading in their initial teaching education (ITE), so too with behaviour management. Teachers often lament that they have not been adequately prepared to deal with the behaviour that they have to deal with, especially given the broad range of students that are present in their classrooms.

Consider an alternative approach – that student behaviour in the classroom actually starts with the teacher. How has the classroom environment been set up to minimise possible disruptions and encourage engaged and positive behaviour? This particular factor is not down to the students but down to the teacher. There are simple ways to avoid problems developing in the first place. Of course, this will not address each and every instance of disruptive behaviour but it will reduce the amount of it that teachers have to deal with.

And it's not just about the classroom set-up. We know how crucial the teacher is in achieving academic results in the classroom. So too is the way that the teacher responds to students in the class. A powerful strategy of acknowledging when students are engaging in pro-social behaviours can really help build a positive classroom environment. One of the problems is how we think of 'behaviour'. We think that behaviour is something that students do and behaviour management is how teachers respond to that. It is often a reactive response. There is a problem and we have to deal with it. But while teachers are very good at recognising and acknowledging the academic work and achievements of their students, they are much less likely to recognise appropriate and engaged social behaviour in the moment in the classroom. This is the



case across all levels of school education. This is a crucial element of building a positive classroom environment.

There is sometimes a certain expectation that students will know how to behave and will automatically do it. But, as with other skills, we have to teach behaviour. Participating in a large group of same-age peers in the presence of one adult is not a particularly natural situation. Consider the days pre-schooling when children would work alongside family members of varying ages, learning what to do and how to behave in given situations. This is a far cry from today's classrooms.

All of this is not to say that serious misbehaviour does not occur in classrooms. It certainly does, as a piece in *EducationHQ* that was published the day after the announcement was made explains. A casual teacher relates a horrifying recent situation where she was repeatedly confronted by a student with a pair of scissors in a visual arts class. (The scissors in question were not part of the lesson, but the student had helped herself to the bank of resources that had been left on the teacher's table.) Fortunately, the teacher sought help that was forthcoming but was dismayed when, after making her report at the end of the day, there was no evidence that the student in question had been put on a 'behaviour plan'. This goes to the critical importance of a whole-school approach, where there are consistent expectations of appropriate and pro-social behaviour and cultural mores that would ensure that such an example would be less likely to arise in the first place.

There is no doubt that support from the leadership in schools is a vital

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component of an effective and positive school environment. There may be school-wide systems of merit certificates and acknowledgement that recognise positive social behaviour, and this is a good thing. But we know that the most effective way to influence behaviour is to respond to it immediately, contingently and abundantly. That's an 'in the moment' action that teachers can take. Behaviour does not occur in a vacuum and there are many ways in which we can set up the classroom environment to make it safer, more positive and more likely to result in

the minimisation of disruptive and dangerous behaviour. And let's not forget that very little learning can occur when the teacher is prevented from teaching. Fortunately, most high-frequency disruptive behaviour (students talking to each other, calling out, preventing other students from learning) is still relatively trivial, as I found in my earlier research. Fortunately, this type of behaviour is amenable to some simple strategies that teachers can put in place relatively readily. When low-intensity but high-frequency behaviour is curtailed there is more capacity for the teacher to actively manage any more serious misbehaviours.

It is incumbent upon teacher educators that they equip teachers with the knowledge and skills that are necessary to create effective and positive learning environments, for both the students and the teacher. It is no wonder that teachers cite disruptive classroom behaviour as one of the primary reasons that they leave the profession. Knowledge is power and there is knowledge about effective classroom management that can be imparted to teachers. We are letting them down if we do not do this.

*Editor's postscript:* On 28 November 2022 the Australian Government Senate referred "The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms" to the Education and Employment Reference Committee for inquiry and report by the first sitting day in July 2023.

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