

# Australia's classroom behaviour crisis

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Data from the OECD and from Australian surveys of teachers demonstrates that we have a behaviour crisis in Australian classrooms. Many of those in authority in Australian education subscribe to bad ideas which prevent us from naming or tackling the problem. Some conflate the issue with one of students with disabilities. We need to overcome this reticence and we need to avoid calls for introducing simplistic top-down solutions. Better training for teachers in classroom management is part of the solution but not all of it. Instead, we need to collect better data so we can identify best practice and we need to deal with behaviour at a whole-school level. Teaching more children to read would also help.

## **The problem**

Australian classrooms have been in crisis for years and nobody has taken responsibility. It is therefore encouraging to see the Australian Senate make it a priority.

The terms of reference of this inquiry write of the ‘declining ranking’ of Australia in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) index of disciplinary climate — an index based on the perceptions of 15-year-old students about disruption in Australian classrooms. While technically correct to state our ranking is declining, a ranking gives a misleading picture due to the larger number of states and jurisdictions that participated in this survey in 2018 compared to 2015. In 2018, Australia finished 69 out of 76 jurisdictions\* (OECD, 2019). Similarly, in 2015, we finished 63 out of 68 (OECD, 2016). This is a roughly consistent position and perhaps surprisingly so when we consider that the 2015 survey asked about experiences in science classes and the 2018 survey asked about experiences in English classes.

Worrying though this data is, it was collected in a period prior to the recent COVID-19 pandemic — a major disruption that plausibly imposed an additional impact on Australian classrooms. Hard data is difficult to find after 2018, but one instrument does suggest a decline since the pandemic began.

Researchers associated with Monash University surveyed a sample of teachers before the pandemic (Heffernan et al., 2019) and then three years later (Longmuir et al., 2022), using the same instrument. During this time, the number of teachers who reported they feel unsafe at work rose from around a fifth to around a quarter, with the majority of those responding indicating students as a source of their concerns. A fifth of teachers feeling unsafe at work is worrying. A quarter is more worrying still, particularly given the current context of an acute teacher shortage (Kidson, 2022).

Some of the anecdotal feedback from teachers in these surveys is deeply troubling. For instance, in 2019, one respondent wrote:

“I’ve had to confiscate knives from students and I’ve been punched in the stomach while pregnant by a student.”

In the 2022 follow-up, a respondent states:

“I have been assaulted by a student which involved both physical, sexual and emotional attacks for an extended period of time. Often, I have to make a decision on if I should protect students from other students and put myself at physical risk. All advice is to never do this which means the psychological guilt of not protecting an innocent child comes into play.”

We can triangulate the findings of the Monash surveys with that of a similar survey conducted in 2021 by The NEiTA Foundation:

“Behaviour management was... frequently nominated by teachers as the greatest challenge they face. Teachers explained that just a small minority of disruptive students can have a large and negative impact on the majority, and that managing these behaviours takes even further time away from teaching. Sixty-eight per cent of teachers indicated that they spend more than 10% of their day managing individual student behavioural issues. Seventeen per cent said that this consumes over half their day”

In such a context, it is difficult to argue that there is no problem to address — that there is nothing to see here. And yet, in an odd way, many of those with power do precisely this. For instance, Senator Penny Allman-Payne has suggested that mention in the inquiry terms of reference of the OECD index is ‘problematic’, as is the the mention of ‘teachers’ views . Presumably, this would problematise the views of teachers as expressed in the Monash and NEiTA surveys (Christian, 2022). Allman-Payne is not alone in such opinions and they fit within a wider framework of ideas.

It is therefore necessary to appreciate the antipathy towards naming, let alone dealing with the issue of classroom disruption. Once we do, articles about the challenges of teaching that focus on levels of ‘stress’, and ‘disrespect’ and even teachers’ ‘workload’ may be interpreted in a different light (Gundlach & Slemp, 2022; Southall et al., 2022; Longmuir, 2023). Such terms may represent the polite way to talk about the classroom behaviour crisis.

### **Barriers to addressing the problem**

Why would anyone seek to deny Australia’s classroom behaviour crisis? Part of the answer may be traced back to a set of pervasive ideas about childhood and education.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s novel *Emile* is a key text in the foundation of modern education and Rousseau was a pivotal figure in the emerging Romantic movement of the eighteenth century. The eponymous protagonist of *Emile* is a young boy being educated according to a new set of principles of which Rousseau approves. Emile is protected from the adult world, the source of all corruption, and is instead placed in nature, the source of all that is good, to make his own sense of the world.

Romanticism views childhood as a state of original innocence. If a child misbehaves — if we are even allowed to use such deficit terminology — it must be due to something the adults have done or have failed to do. Unlike adults, children are not motivated by meanness, jealousy, revenge or laziness — although it is unclear exactly when the switchover occurs. In modern terms, this becomes the claim that ‘all behaviour is communication’ (see e.g. Rose, 2014).

It may sound like a stretch to assert that a book of which many modern educationalists and bureaucrats may only be dimly aware lies partly behind modern decision-making, perceptions and biases, but as the economist John Maynard-Keynes sharply observed:

"The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist."

We can trace a line through Rousseau to early twentieth century philosophers such as John Dewey and right up to present day education faculties, whether those drawing on these ideas are aware of these figures or not. The overwhelming influence of these ideas has been positive in that they have caused educators to move away from practices such as physical punishment and to pay attention to the psychological needs of young people.

Unfortunately, we sometimes take ideas to extremes.

‘All behaviour is communication,’ is an example of what the philosopher Daniel Dennett terms a ‘deepity’ (Burkeman, 2013). It can be read on two levels — one that is true and trivial and one that is false but that would be highly significant if it was true. It is then possible to bamboozle people by smuggling a falsehood in on the coattails of a truth. Clearly, at one level, all behaviour *potentially* communicates something about the state of mind of the person who is demonstrating that behaviour. Yet, at another level, it is false to assume that all behaviour is an attempt to communicate an unmet need. Unfortunately, it is common to use the former truth to imply the latter falsehood.

Many teachers I speak to recall the feeling of being blamed for the poor behaviour of students. Perhaps they have asked a school leader for help with a difficult class. Too often, the school leader will suggest they have not planned an engaging enough lesson or they have failed to meet their students’ needs in some other way, as if basic respect and workplace safety should be contingent upon this. It is a useful argument for busy school leaders to draw

upon because it absolves them of responsibility while giving them a seemingly positive reason to do so based on a child-centered philosophy.

In reality, student behaviour is affected by many factors other than the teacher. A child could arrive at school following a significant disturbance at home, for instance. There is little that lesson planning can do to address this. However, in a culture where teachers are blamed for — and perhaps even feel guilty about — poor behaviour in their classrooms, there is an incentive to minimise the problem.

Highlighting behaviour issues reflects badly on individual teachers who, by implication, did not meet children's needs. It also reflects badly on school leaders whose schools also did not meet these needs and may be unsafe as a result, and it implies action when the dominant ideas in education suggest no effective means for dealing with the problem. And so we have silence.

### **The full inclusion lobby**

Squeamishness about naming the problem of disordered classrooms also arises out of a concern about stigmatising students with disabilities (see e.g. Christian, 2022). This concern is voiced by an active lobby made up of campaigners and academics who argue for the full inclusion of students with a disability in mainstream classrooms. To the uninitiated, the issue of disability initially seems unrelated to that of classroom disorder.

However, many neurological disabilities and disorders can affect behaviour. Examples include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Conduct Disorder (CD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Many of the diagnostic criteria are *based on* behaviours, creating something of a circular argument (see, for example, the diagnostic criteria for ODD from the American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

If a student has such a disability or disorder then their behaviour may be viewed as being a result of that disability or disorder and attempts to address it may be interpreted as a form of discrimination.

Disability advocates highlight the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) and the duty they impose on schools and teachers to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for students with a disability.

However, the Standards also note that there ‘is no requirement to make unreasonable adjustments’ and explain that:

“In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable [several factors] are considered, including any effect of the proposed adjustment on anyone else affected, including the education provider, staff and other students, and the costs and benefits of making the adjustment.”

Advocates of full inclusion tend to argue for classroom ‘differentiation’ — a vaguely defined term that implies teaching students in the same classroom differently (see e.g. Graham & Cologon, 2016). This logic maintains that with appropriate training and resources, teachers in mainstream classrooms should be able make adjustments and differentiate learning to suit students with any form of disability or disorder, no matter how profound, as well as those with none. This is an extension of the ‘all behaviour is communication’ argument and the imperative to cater to individual needs.

Setting aside the implied disregard for the skills of educators who work in special education settings, this is essentially a faith-based position.

There is no rigorous body of empirical evidence to support the practice of differentiation (Ashman, 2020). Asking students within a classroom to complete different learning activities has intuitive appeal. However, in most Australian classrooms, there is only one qualified teacher and so any potential gains from a more targeted approach may be at the cost of less teacher time per student or group of students. And that is before we ask questions about the basis on which different tasks are selected and the potential for lowering expectations in the process. It therefore comes as little surprise that popular frameworks for differentiation such as *Universal Design for Learning* have so far failed to yield evidence of effectiveness (Capp, 2017). One academic has even drawn parallels between *Universal Design for Learning* and the widely discredited idea of catering to students’ supposed ‘learning styles’ (Boysen, 2021).

In a significant development, a highly influential and widely cited advocacy paper that ostensibly draws on evidence to make the broader case for full inclusion (Cologon, 2019) has recently been critiqued by special education experts. They describe it as relying, ‘heavily on opinion and non-peer-reviewed literature, with little use of quantitative research that compares outcomes for students in different settings’ (Stephenson & Ganguly, 2022).

Yet perhaps this misses the point. Full inclusion is essentially a rights-based argument. It asserts that all children, whatever their needs, have a *right* to be educated in a mainstream classroom alongside same-age peers. Its advocates are less concerned with empirical evidence or practical realities.

In an illuminating paper, two sceptical researchers from the UK note that (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020):

“Some senior academics in key positions in the field of special education have promoted a vision of full inclusion, now often portrayed by the term, “All Means All”, in which all children, with no exception, must be educated in mainstream school classrooms alongside their age peers. This policy advice has been promoted despite the widely reported concerns of teachers and parents, and the lack of research evidence for the advantages of inclusive education for some children over traditional special education provision and placements.”

They go on to detail how the ‘all means all’ position is baked into the infrastructure of academia, with few incentives for early career researchers seeking advancement to take a sceptical stance.

It is this same rights-based argument that causes full inclusion advocates to constantly agitate against school suspensions and expulsions (see e.g. Graham, 2018). They will point to the disproportionate representation of children with disabilities and disorders in these statistics and interpret this as evidence of systemic bias rather than the logical consequence of the fact that many disabilities and disorders impact behaviour and, in many cases, are diagnosed from troubling behaviour. They will highlight studies that show students who are suspended or excluded from school are more likely to come in contact with the criminal justice system, as if suspensions and

expulsions *caused* these outcomes rather than challenging behaviour causing both suspensions and expulsions *and* the contact with the criminal justice system. They will argue suspensions and expulsions do not work, on the basis that they do not cure suspended or expelled students of challenging behaviour.

If we return to the teacher who was punched in the stomach, we might ask whether expelling that student from school would have worked *for the teacher*. Similarly, we may ask whether expelling a violent bully would work *for the students being bullied*. Schools are communities and community responses are about more than the individual being sanctioned, yet it is usually only that individual whose subsequent outcomes are recorded and used as the basis for research articles.

Everyone involved in education would wish to see suspensions and expulsions reduced. I want to see this happen because behaviour in schools has improved and there is less need for them. Others campaign for top-down mandates to reduce the use of these measures. Critically, such mandates do not reduce the incidents of challenging behaviour. By creating a culture of impunity, they may even lead to an increase in the number of such incidents.

Periodically, we see an education system go through a cycle where inclusion advocates persuade system leaders to mandate a top-down reduction in suspensions and expulsions. This is then followed by a period in which behaviour escalates and the media begin reporting on disturbing incidents. Finally, political pressure causes system leaders to ease or remove the mandates. Such a cycle happened recently in Victoria (Cook, 2018) and appears to be currently underway in Scotland (Stewart, 2023).

By focusing on classroom disruption, some disability advocates will be concerned that this inquiry will result in questions about the place of students with disabilities and disorders in mainstream classrooms and that these questions may hamper the advocates' campaigns for full inclusion and against suspensions and expulsions.

**See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil**



It is no coincidence that the most significant piece of data we have reflecting Australia's classroom behaviour crisis comes from the OECD, an international organisation. Fear of naming the issue means that we do not collect such information in a systematic way across Australia.

Moreover, Australian teachers in government schools are largely prevented from commenting on this or any other issue of education policy by restrictive media and social media policies. This means the public are uninformed by a key perspective on a substantial issue of public policy. It will therefore be interesting to see how many feel able to contribute to this inquiry.

In addition, a key strategy of the full inclusion lobby is to exert control over the language that may be used to describe classroom disruption, as has been seen in the objections put forward to the terms of reference. By only allowing a highly educated class in possession of currently acceptable specialist vocabulary to discuss the issue, it is possible to shape the overall debate.

### **Teacher Training is not enough**

One obvious response to the classroom behaviour crisis is to prioritise the training of teachers in classroom management techniques. For example, the *Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* (Australian Government, 2021) notes that many new teachers feel underprepared for dealing with classroom management issues and recommends this component of teacher education be strengthened.

Undoubtedly, there are classroom management techniques that teachers can learn that will reduce problem behaviours. Summarising the research in a book for new teachers, I noted that many of the most promising strategies draw from the 'behaviourist' tradition in psychology (Ashman, 2018). Despite some widespread misconceptions, this does not rely primarily on the application of negative sanctions. Behaviourists suggest there are three foci — antecedents, behaviours and consequences. Antecedents are the conditions in which behaviours occur and by manipulating them, we can reduce problematic behaviour. This approach recognises the fact that behaviour is often affected by context. So, for instance, a teacher might arrange students to face the front rather than each other, reducing the potential for distraction.

Although negative consequences have to be available, in the behaviourist framework, consequences are mainly focused on positive reinforcement. So, for instance, if I am teaching a class and I notice that some students in the front row have not started a task, rather than admonishing them, I might say, “Excellent to see everyone on the back row has their books out and has started.” Students on the front row are then likely to respond. There are many such techniques that can be taught to teachers and practised by them until they become an unconscious part of their everyday practice.

However, classroom management training is not enough. Most teachers can respond to most situations if given the appropriate tools, but there will always be some behaviours that sit outside the envelope of what a teacher with 25+ other students to also look after can cope with — recall the example of the child who comes to school after a significant disturbance at home. This is where a whole-school approach is essential. In challenging schools, teachers need to know how to call for help when needed, what that help will consist of and that they will not be blamed or undermined for using that system. They need to know how and when to escalate matters they are unable to address.

A whole-school system has other advantages. Rather than every individual teacher having their own rules and techniques for enforcing those rules, something that requires students to remember all of these differences and adjust to them, there is efficiency in all teachers taking the same approach. In my experience, once this dovetails with a positive school culture that is rehearsed through assemblies and other significant events, the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts.

This is the approach being taken in England, where the government have appointed a behaviour adviser — an ex-teacher — to roll-out best practice through a series of ‘behaviour hubs’ (Bennett, 2022).

Unfortunately, in Australia, such an initiative would be strongly opposed by education academics and bureaucrats. The behaviourist approach does not align well with Romantic views of childhood — instead of attempting to modify or ‘coerce’ behaviour, we should be listening to the needs the behaviour is telling us are going unmet and respond accordingly. Prominent

voices, such as Dr David Armstrong, have repeatedly, and perhaps ironically, voiced their objection to the concept of 'behaviour management' as outdated (see e.g. EducationHQ, 2017). Again, this can be seen as an attempt to control the language that may be used to discuss the problem.

## **Potential Solutions**

To address this problem in any serious way will require resolve because, as I have indicated, the established authorities in the education sector are not interested in even naming the problem, let alone addressing it. If an Australian government committed itself to demonstrating such resolve, in addition to improving classroom management training, two potential solutions to Australia's behaviour crisis flow naturally from the discussion above.

Firstly, we need our own systematic data collection so that we are not reliant on the OECD. It would be relatively simple to add a few questions similar to those that are used to construct the OECD's index of disciplinary climate to the end of one of the online NAPLAN papers that Australian students sit in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Such data could then be linked to individual schools and we could potentially draw inferences about effective and less effective school policies. This data should be made available to the public. I would argue that school-level data should be available via the MySchool website to inform parental school choice, but, even if it were not, it could be made available to researchers and education departments.

We also need to think about how we roll-out effective whole-school behaviour policies. Behaviour management should no longer be a cottage industry where charismatic teachers somehow get by as other teachers, often from more marginalised backgrounds, bear the brunt of the crisis. Teachers in any given school should all expect to be afforded the same basic level of respect, whether they are casual, new to the post, short in stature, female or from an ethnic minority background. They should expect to be treated the same because behavioural expectations should be owned by the school and not individuals. To this end, the approach taken in England of having a postholder drive the sharing of best practice is one we should adopt.

We should avoid the impulse to impose top-down mandates to reduce suspensions and exclusions as if setting targets for tractor production in the Soviet Union. Although resisting this impulse will not solve anything, following it is likely to make the situation in classrooms significantly worse.

And finally, although it is fallacious to attribute all challenging behaviour to an unmet need, it is equally fallacious to never see such links. Imagine you are a ten-year-old child who cannot read. Imagine being sent to school every day where you are surrounded by texts and the expectation to read these texts and write responses. How would that make you feel? Would you rebel? Many of us would and the same argument can be made for other basic skills such as mathematics. We therefore need to prioritise teaching methods that ensure the greatest proportion of students develop these skills and abilities. There is no conflict between such an objective and the objective of having safe and orderly classrooms where all students can learn. However, ensuring we adopt the most effective teaching practices is for another inquiry.

*\*It is often erroneously claimed we finished 70 by those who include the OECD average as one of the jurisdictions*

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