

Submission by Associate Professor Rebecca Collie to the Senate Inquiry into The Issue of Increasing Disruption in Australian School Classrooms

Relevant Background

I am an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of New South Wales and former primary school teacher. I conduct research in the broad areas of student and teacher wellbeing, motivation, and social-emotional development. As part of this, I am interested in how to create optimal learning and teaching conditions for both students and teachers.

Over the past few years, I have been leading a research project funded by the Australian Research Council focused on teacher working conditions and how these are linked with teachers' occupational outcomes, as well as implications for students and schools. Below I provide evidence and recommendations based on research stemming from that project, as well as my other work on the topic.

Response to the Terms of Reference

I provide below a brief summary of evidence on disruptive student behaviour as relevant to the following points under the Terms of Reference:

- (b) the impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention
- (c) teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them;
- (e) the loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms;
- (f) the impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms;
- (g) the stagnant and declining results across fundamental disciplines as tested through National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) attributing to poorer school-leaving results and post-school attainment;

Impacts of Disruptive Student Behaviour on Teachers

Ample research highlights that disruptive or challenging student behaviour can have a detrimental impact on teachers.

Teachers who experience disruptive behaviour in their classrooms are significantly less likely to be committed to the profession (Collie, 2021a), and are also more likely to be intending to quit their jobs and seek out alternative work (Collie, 2022).

Both of these outcomes are concerning given the substantial teacher shortages across Australia at the moment. Notably, however, in schools where school leaders report that they provide support for discipline issues within classrooms, teachers have higher commitment to the profession (Collie, 2021a).

Teacher working conditions (including demands, such as disruptive student behaviour) appear to be getting worse over time. In our study of over 3,000 Australian teachers using data collected as part of the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2013, my colleagues and I identified that 34% of teachers could be considered struggling at work due to their experiences of poor working conditions, including heightened levels of disruptive student behaviour that make it difficult to teach effectively (Collie, Malmberg et al., 2020).

These teachers who were struggling at work also reported significantly lower levels of job satisfaction and reduced commitment to the profession when compared with teachers reporting better working conditions.

Impact of Disruptive Student Behaviour on Instruction and Learning

The impact of disruptive student behaviour extends to students and school outcomes.

In 2021, we replicated the Collie, Malmberg et al. (2020) study among 3,000 Australian teachers using data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2018 (Collie, Martin et al., 2021).

Our findings showed that in the five years between 2013 for the original study and 2018 for the replication study, the number of teachers struggling at work increased from 34% to 47%.

This is a substantial jump over five years, and may be even more stark now given that teacher working conditions have become more challenging since the COVID-19 pandemic began (Kim et al., 2021; Collie, 2021b).

In our study, we also found that schools with comparatively more struggling teachers had significantly lower student achievement in reading, mathematics, and science (when compared with schools with fewer struggling teachers). Students also reported lower levels of effective instructional practices, including less provision of support for their self-initiative, less use of feedback to advance learning, and fewer efforts to inspire enthusiasm and enjoyment of learning.

In another study, we demonstrated that in schools where students report higher disruptive behaviour in their lessons, teachers are less able to adapt their instruction in the classroom (Collie, Granziera et al., 2020).

Instructional adaptability is a hallmark of effective teaching because it means that teachers are being responsive to student learning needs and are able to adjust pacing or content as required.

In turn, our study showed that lower instructional adaptability was associated with teachers who were less confident in their teaching ability and students who were less confident in learning science.

Disruptive behaviour also has ramifications for students' later outcomes. In a study of over 150,000 NSW children in the first year of school, we found that almost 20% displayed patterns of heightened disruptive behaviour (Collie et al., 2019). These students went on to attain significantly lower levels in their NAPLAN tests in grade 3 and grade 5.

These results underscore the importance of early intervention. The economist, James Heckman (2008), argues that early intervention is crucial for developing children's social, emotional, and behavioural skills because attributes that are developed earlier boost the return on investment of later interventions. Additionally, abilities acquired earlier in life not only help the development of those same abilities later on, but also provide foundations for building other essential capabilities (Heckman, 2008).

Recommendations

It is clear that disruptive behaviour is problematic for teachers, students, and schools. Based on the body of research summarised above, the following recommendations are presented:

1. Provide more resourcing for schools and school leaders to better support teachers to navigate diverse student needs. This should include funding to support students' wellbeing, mental health, and behavioural needs so that teachers can concentrate on the core business of teaching.
2. Ensure teachers in all schools across metropolitan, regional, and remote Australia have access to effective, research-supported professional learning opportunities on behaviour management that are ongoing, involve active participation, and align well with teachers' goals for improving their skills.
3. Apply effective mentoring and coaching programs to help teachers develop their behaviour management skills, as well as their skills in engaging students in learning.
4. Develop and apply early intervention efforts to give children support for behavioural issues when they enter schooling, rather than leaving this till later when the cumulative impacts of consecutive years of disruptive behaviour can lead to significantly poorer outcomes for those children.

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