

Punish Them or Engage Them?





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This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (project LP110100317). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council or Industry Partners.

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Acknowledgements

The Behaviour at School Study has relied on the generous commitment of time and support from many people.

This study involved the collaboration and commitment of major education partner organisations in South Australia, namely:

- Department of Education and Child Development (DECD)
- Catholic Education South Australia (CESA)
- Association of Independent Schools South Australia (AISSA)
- South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA)
- Association of Principals of Catholic Secondary Schools, South Australia (APCSS)
- South Australian Primary Principals Association (SAPPA)
- South Australian Catholic Primary Principals Association (SACPPA)

Researchers from the University of South Australia and Flinders University, employer representatives from the government, Catholic and independent sectors, and delegates from the principals' associations participated in regular roundtables. The roundtables were established to facilitate a collaborative approach to the research. In particular, our intent was to provide a forum to better understand and respond to issues associated with student behaviour in schools.

We acknowledge the contribution of the teachers and leaders who saw value in participating in this study. Thank you for providing your 'voice'.

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Background

This report presents the initial findings from an ARC Linkage Grant, titled 'Punish them or engage them? Identifying and addressing productive and unproductive student behaviours in South Australian schools' (LP110100317), more commonly referred to as the Behaviour at School Study (BaSS). The study was conducted in 2011. A full technical report underpinning this overview is available at www.bass.edu.au

A central theoretical premise guiding this study is that engagement in learning directly influences student behaviour. We know that there is a well-established link between student engagement, student behaviour and academic achievement (Angus et al., 2009; Hattie, 2003; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). In this study, therefore, we use the terms 'productive' and 'unproductive' behaviours (Angus et al., 2009) rather than the more commonly used terms in the literature of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' behaviours to reflect the link between behaviour and teaching and learning.

Recently, a significant longitudinal study investigated the relationship between classroom behaviour and academic performance (Angus et al., 2009). In this study teachers were asked to rate their students on a checklist of ten 'unproductive behaviours', defined as actions that impede a student's academic progress. Angus and his colleagues found that in any year:

- 60% of students were considered to behave productively,
- 20% were disengaged,
- 12% were low-level disruptive, and
- 8% were uncooperative.

Over the four-year period of the study,

- 40% of students were consistently productive,
- 20% were consistently unproductive, and
- 40% fluctuated from year to year.

In relation to academic performance, the uncooperative group, typified by aggression, non-compliance and disruption, performed worst, but the disengaged group, who were compliant and not aggressive, performed only marginally better. Students in the disengaged group were generally cooperative but found their school work uninteresting, gave up on tasks, were easily distracted, did not prepare for lessons and opted out of class activities. As the authors noted, the group that received the greatest time and resources in relation to behaviour was the uncooperative group, while the quiet, disengaged group was often left unnoticed. In their recommendations, the authors highlighted the importance of increasing levels of student engagement via changes to policy, pedagogy and resources.

Drawing on an ecological model we viewed a learning environment as an ecosystem involving interactions between the physical environment, teacher characteristics, curriculum (including pedagogy and resources), and a multitude of student variables, all of which influence student behaviour (see Figure 1).

Explanations of both productive and unproductive behaviours must therefore consider the interaction of all four components of the learning ecosystem. At a broader school level, behaviour within multiple school settings (e.g. classrooms, playground/yard, canteen) is again the result of interactions between the setting, the participants and the activities. Hence the key principle is that student behaviour does not exist in isolation but within the interaction between all elements of the relevant ecosystem. At the whole-school level, the influences of outside factors (home, socioeconomic, political, cultural/racial/religious) impact on the ecology of the school as well as internal factors.

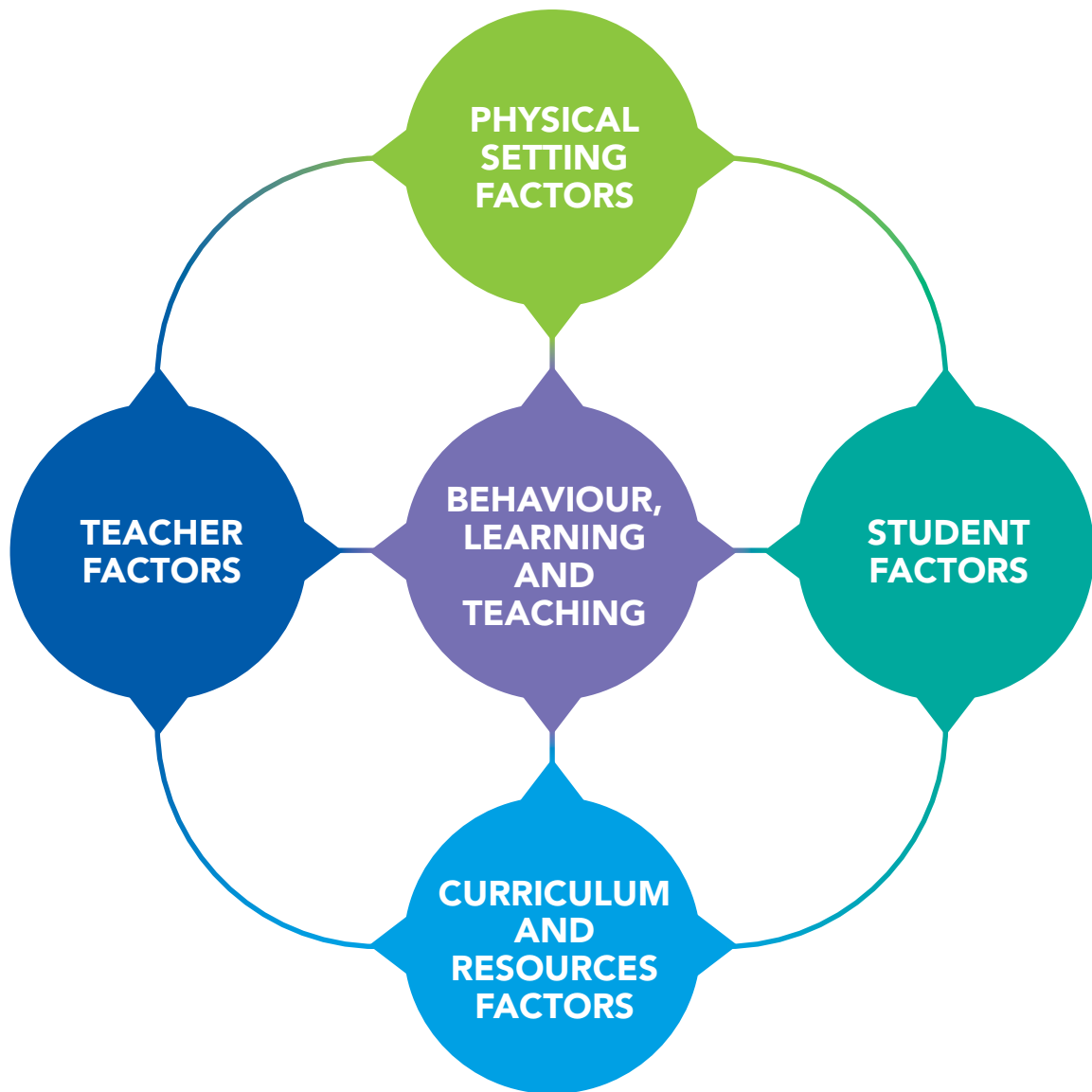


Figure 1 Ecological Model of the Classroom (adapted from Conway, 2012)

Research Design

The study aimed to investigate the extent to which student behaviour is a concern for teachers. We used the Behaviour at School Study Teacher Survey (BaSS Teacher Survey) to investigate the views of teachers about student behaviour in South Australian schools. This initial report summarises teachers' views on student behaviour in the classroom.

The pool of respondents ($n = 1,380$) comprised teachers who taught in primary (49%) and middle/secondary (51%) schools. Approximately two thirds of respondents were female (68%). The majority of teachers were employed full time (80%) and on a permanent basis (79%). Most respondents were employed as teachers (71%) and the remainder were employed at management levels: senior teacher (22%); principal or deputy principal (7%); One per cent did not indicate their employment status.

The teachers were employed in schools across all sectors in South Australia, which included metropolitan (66%), rural (24%) and remote (5%) locations (and other 5%). The size of the schools varied from small enrolments of less than 100 students (5%) to very large enrolments of greater than 1000 students (18%).

We organised the 23 items related to unproductive behaviours in classrooms conceptually into three groups: (a) low-level disruptive behaviours, (b) disengaged behaviours, and (c) aggressive/anti-social behaviours. We used descriptive statistics to quantify the nature and frequency of student behaviours reported by teachers. We used cross tabulations to analyse the behaviours of students according to age, gender, location, type of school, and socioeconomic status. We conducted ANOVAs and post hoc analyses to investigate any differences in teachers' responses to particular student behaviours and the attributions for those behaviours on the basis of teacher age, gender, location, level of schooling, level and type of position, teaching experience, and the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) status of the school.

Key Messages

Contrary to media reports, aggressive and anti-social student behaviours do not occur frequently in South Australian classrooms. However, low-level disruptive behaviours and disengaged behaviours occur more frequently and teachers find these difficult to manage.

Data analysis revealed:

- Primary teachers reported low-level disruptive behaviours and aggressive/anti-social behaviours significantly more often than middle/secondary teachers.
- Early career teachers reported significantly higher instances of managing low-level disruptive behaviours than the majority of other categories of experience.
- Younger teachers (<30 years) reported the highest scores for low-level disruptive and disengaged categories of behaviours, therefore more frequently addressed these behaviours than all other age groups.
- Teachers employed in schools with a low ICSEA value reported significantly more instances of low-level disruptive and disengaged behaviours than those in schools with higher ICSEA values.
- Teachers in remote schools, who tended to be younger and have less teaching experience, reported significantly more instances of disengaged behaviours and aggressive/anti-social behaviours than teachers in other locations.

Socio-cultural influences, economic forces, geographic differences, and in some cases gender differences confound our findings and caution us against drawing overly simple conclusions.

In our sample of teachers, 47% indicated that they are not stressed about unproductive student behaviours. Of the 53% who reported feeling stressed, results showed that:

- Teachers who also have leadership responsibilities (e.g. principals and coordinators) report being less stressed than other teachers.
- Primary teachers are more stressed than middle/secondary teachers.
- Younger teachers (<30 years) and those in the 50–59 age bracket are the most stressed age groups.

Generally, teachers tend to attribute unproductive student behaviour to individual student and out-of school factors rather than to school factors.

In summary, the results suggest that low-level disruptive and disengaged student behaviours are quite common in classrooms. These behaviours occur frequently and many teachers find them difficult to manage. For some teachers, such behaviours contribute to feelings of stress.

The Nature and Extent of Unproductive Student Classroom Behaviours

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY TOTAL SAMPLE

- Teachers encountered low-level disruptive behaviours and disengaged behaviours on a daily basis.
- *Talking out of turn, avoiding doing schoolwork and disengaging from classroom activities* were the most prevalent unproductive student behaviours.
- Over two thirds of teachers reported disengaged behaviours on at least an 'almost daily' basis.
- Over two thirds of teachers reported that aggressive/anti-social behaviours either did not occur at all during the school week or occurred only on one or two days per week.

The results for the nature and extent of unproductive student behaviours reported by teachers are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Individual Unproductive Student Behaviours by Total Sample

	% OF ALL TEACHERS (N = 1380)			
	NOT AT ALL	ON ONE OR TWO DAYS PER WEEK	ALMOST DAILY/DAILY	SEVERAL TIMES DAILY
DISENGAGED BEHAVIOURS				
Being late for class	10	24	43	24
Avoiding doing schoolwork	4	21	32	43
Disengaging from classroom activities	5	21	33	41
LOW-LEVEL DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOURS				
Disrupting the flow of a lesson	14	21	32	33
Talking out of turn	4	18	29	50
Making distracting noises intentionally	26	23	26	24
Interfering with property	29	32	24	15
Moving around the room unnecessarily	20	27	26	27
Using a mobile phone inappropriately	56	19	11	13
Using a laptop or iPad inappropriately	67	20	8	6
Making impertinent remarks	27	33	21	19
Mucking around, being rowdy	18	34	28	21
AGGRESSIVE/ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS				
Spreading rumours	38	41	18	3
Excluding peers	33	44	19	4
Verbally abusing other students	43	30	18	9
Verbally abusing teachers	74	18	6	2
Sexually harassing other students	72	21	6	1
Sexually harassing teachers	94	5	1	0
Being physically aggressive towards other students	46	35	14	6
Being physically aggressive towards teachers	93	6	1	0
Being extremely violent to students and teachers	94	5	1	0
Being physically destructive	78	18	3	0
Displaying uncharacteristically erratic behaviours	46	36	12	6

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY SCHOOL LEVEL

- Primary teachers reported significantly more instances of low-level disruptive and aggressive/anti-social behaviours than middle/secondary teachers.
- Both primary and middle/secondary teachers addressed disengaged behaviours on an almost daily, if not daily, basis.
- Aggressive/anti-social behaviours were the least reported unproductive classroom behaviours across both primary and middle/secondary schools.
- Significantly more primary than middle/secondary teachers reported the need to manage all unproductive classroom behaviours several times a day, aside from *using a mobile phone or laptop inappropriately, being late for class and sexually harassing other students*, which were very rarely identified as behaviours of concern.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY SCHOOL LOCATION

- On average the disengaged behaviours category was the most frequently reported unproductive classroom behaviour regardless of the school location.
- Teachers in remote school settings reported addressing disengaged behaviours more frequently than teachers from other locations.
- Teachers in remote schools were significantly more likely to address aggressive/anti-social behaviours than teachers in any other location.
- Of the behaviours for which significant differences between school locations were evident, *deliberately disrupting the flow of a lesson* was the behaviour most frequently managed on a daily basis by teachers across all geographic settings.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY INDEX OF COMMUNITY SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGE (ICSEA)

- Aggressive/anti-social behaviours were the least reported behaviours across all ICSEA categories.
- Teachers in schools in the ≥ 1101 ICSEA category reported significantly lower instances of low-level disruptive, disengaged and aggressive/anti-social behaviours than teachers from schools in all other ICSEA categories.
- Schools in the ≤ 900 and 901–1000 ICSEA categories reported significantly higher instances of low-level disruptive and disengaged behaviours than all other ICSEA categories.
- Teachers in schools from the ≤ 900 ICSEA reported significantly higher instances of aggressive/anti-social behaviours than teachers from the remaining ICSEA categories.
- *Deliberately disrupting the flow of a lesson and being late for class* were the behaviours most frequently managed throughout a school day across all ICSEA categories.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY SCHOOL SIZE

- Teachers employed in schools with student enrolments of 100–199 and 200–299 on average reported a higher incidence of unproductive behaviours across all three categories.
- *Inappropriate use of mobile phones* was one of the least frequently reported behaviours across all categories of school size.
- *Moving around the room unnecessarily and deliberately disrupting the flow of a lesson* were the behaviours teachers across all categories reported addressing the most frequently throughout the school day.
- Teachers from schools with enrolments in the combined categories of 100–299 reported significantly higher frequencies of managing low-level disruptive behaviours than schools with enrolments above 1000.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY TEACHERS' AGE

- Teachers in the youngest age bracket (<30 years) recorded the highest mean across low-level disruptive and disengaged categories of behaviour, indicating they encountered the behaviours more frequently than teachers in other age categories.
- Of all five age groups, teachers in the oldest age category (60+ years) recorded the lowest mean across all three behaviour categories, which indicates they reported the lowest frequency of unproductive classroom behaviours in comparison to teachers in the remaining age categories, although numerically they were the smallest group.
- Teachers in the 50–59 age bracket reported the highest mean for addressing aggressive/anti-social behaviours, although this group also contained most school leaders.
- The major differences between the age groups are apparent in the frequency of low-level disruptive behaviours.
- In all age groups, 20% or more of teachers reported behaviours related to *students verbally abusing other students* on at least an 'almost daily' basis.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY TEACHERS' GENDER

- No significant differences were evident between male and female teachers in their reporting of managing unproductive classroom behaviours at the category level, although there were significant differences for some specific behaviours.
- At the individual level, of the behaviours for which significant differences were apparent, both male and female teachers reported talking out of turn as the most frequently addressed behaviour on a daily basis.
- The majority of both males and females reported they did not need to manage behaviours associated with the *inappropriate use of mobile phones and laptops*.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Teachers with less than 5 years' teaching experience reported the highest average incidence of all three behaviour categories, while teachers with 15–19 years of teaching experience reported the lowest average incidence across all three behaviour categories.
- Teachers with less than 5 years of experience reported higher levels of low-level disruptive behaviours.
- Across all categories of years of experience, disengaged behaviours were the most frequently managed behaviours by teachers, on an almost daily, if not daily, basis.
- Teachers most frequently addressed *disengaging from classroom activities*.
- Over one third of all teachers, regardless of their years of experience, reported that they did not manage behaviours related to students either *displaying uncharacteristically erratic behaviour or verbally abusing other students*.

UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS BY APPOINTMENT STATUS

- *Deliberately disrupting the flow of a lesson* was the most frequently addressed behaviour throughout the school day, regardless of the teachers' level of appointment.
- Principals/deputy/assistant principals and heads of sub-schools recorded the lowest mean for managing low-level disruptive behaviours.
- Senior teachers had the lowest mean for managing disengaged and aggressive/anti-social behaviours.

Teacher Stress Related to Unproductive Student Behaviour in the Classroom

- 53% of teachers indicated that students' behaviour caused them stress.
- Primary teachers were significantly more stressed about managing unproductive student behaviours than teachers in the middle/secondary years.
- Approximately one third of teachers in the top quartile of the ICSEA scale reported feeling stressed; whereas over 60% of teachers employed in schools in educationally disadvantaged communities reported feeling stressed.
- Teachers under 30 years of age and those between 50 and 59 years of age were significantly more likely to report that they felt stressed than other age groups.
- A significantly higher percentage of teachers reported feeling stressed compared with senior teachers and principals/deputy/assistant principals/heads of sub-schools.

The Most Difficult Classroom Behaviours to Manage

- Across the total sample, teachers reported that disengaged and low-level disruptive behaviours were among the most difficult behaviours to manage.
- The most difficult behaviour to manage was *avoiding doing schoolwork*.
- *Sexual harassment of teachers or other students* ranked as the least difficult behaviour teachers address in a classroom setting.
- Aggressive student behaviours directed towards teachers were among the least difficult behaviours to manage.

Seriousness of Unproductive Behaviour

- Two thirds of teachers reported that student behaviours at their school in the last week were not very serious.
- One third of teachers found the student behaviours at their school to be serious or very serious.
- Primary teachers were more likely to identify behaviours as serious or very serious than middle/secondary teachers were.

Suggestions for Improving Student Behaviour

- Most teachers agreed that establishing smaller classes (87%) and *providing more opportunities for teachers to help each other with student behaviour problems* (86%) would help improve student behaviour.
- 81% of teachers indicated that student behaviour could be improved by *providing more staff training and development on ways to manage student behaviour*.
- Only 18% of teachers suggested that *improving security in schools* would improve student behaviour.

Factors that Contribute to Unproductive Student Behaviour

- Teachers were most likely to attribute unproductive student behaviour to individual student factors or out-of-school factors.
- Teachers were less likely to attribute unproductive behaviour to school factors.
- Most teachers commonly reported student unproductive behaviour as being outside the teacher's control. Only approximately one third of teachers saw that *inappropriate curriculum and ineffective school student management policies* accounted for unproductive student behaviour to some or a great extent.

Behaviour Management Strategies and their Effectiveness by Total Sample

- The most common behaviour management strategy was *reasoning with a student in the classroom setting*.
- The least used behaviour management strategies were *in- or out-of-school suspension, initiating a conference involving the student, caregivers and senior staff to discuss the student's behaviour, sending the student to the deputy principal, principal, counsellor or other senior teacher and referring students to another teacher*.
- 63% of teachers indicated that they never *initiate a conference involving the student, caregivers and senior staff* to discuss a student's behaviour.
- 33.3% of teachers reported *using a 'step' system* as the most effective behaviour management strategy.

Summary

This report has provided the results of a survey of teachers in South Australian primary and middle/secondary schools on the types of behaviours demonstrated by students in the previous week of their teaching.

We have reported data on school characteristics such as school size, level of school (primary, middle/secondary), school location and school ICSEA category. We also collected data on teacher characteristics such as gender, age, length of teaching experience and length of teaching at the current school.

We identified three categories of unproductive behaviour:

- low-level disruptive behaviours
- disengaged behaviours
- aggressive/anti-social behaviours.

While teachers reported managing behaviours in all three categories, most of the student behaviours they encountered were either low-level disruptive or disengaged behaviours. Although there were incidents of aggressive/anti-social behaviours these were infrequent.

The full technical report is available at www.bass.edu.au

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