



# Managing Classroom Behaviour

*This article by Fiona Crawford appeared in the May 2006 issue of Macquarie University News. It is reprinted with their kind permission.*

**The old adage that you catch more flies with honey is also true in the classroom, with a recent Macquarie University study revealing that teachers should spend more time giving positive attention to good classroom behaviour than in reprimanding bad behaviour.**

Robyn Beaman, Research and Development Manager at the Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) recently completed her PhD research on troublesome classroom behaviour and the interactions between students and teachers in high school.

She found that where teachers dealt with troublesome behaviour in a negative way, students not only perceived themselves to be less engaged, their on-task behaviour was actually reduced.

"In relation to the type of attention being given to academic and social behaviour, I found that teachers were really great at providing approval about students' academic work but when it came to their social behaviour they were quite poor at it," Beaman says.

"I found that in classrooms where there was a lot of negative attention to social behaviour there was significantly lower student perception of participation in their environment," she explains.

"There was also evidence to suggest that there is a relationship between negative teacher attention and the on-task behaviour of students. Even when that negative attention is primarily directed toward the boys in the class, observations identified that the on-task behaviour of girls was actually lower in these environments. This is quite an important educational finding because there is a lot of talk about student engagement and participation in class," she adds.

Beaman's research involved studies in two main areas.

The first of these examined the perceptions of 145 secondary teachers from New South Wales with regard to behaviours they found to be troublesome in their classrooms. Via questionnaire, 'talking out of turn' was clearly identified by teachers as the classroom behaviour of most concern, the one that most frequently occurred and, importantly, the main misbehaviour of the most troublesome individual students.

*"Teachers need to focus on what they do want students to do, not what they don't."*

Typically around four students in a class of 21 were revealed to be troublesome and according to Beaman, trends in the data suggest that difficult behaviour builds in Year 8, peaks in Year 9 and starts to ebb in Year 10. When teachers were asked if they thought they spent more time than they should on classroom behaviour management 53 per cent reported that they did.

"All the media attention surrounds violence and disruption in schools but when we asked teachers what they found the most challenging behaviour on a day to day basis, they said it is kids talking out of turn," explains Beaman.

"Teachers find that this high level, but relatively trivial misbehaviour, really gets them down. It's the most troublesome, disruptive, and frequent behaviour they have difficulty with."

Other behaviours that were reported as troublesome were the hindering of other students, being slow to respond to teacher instruction and idleness.

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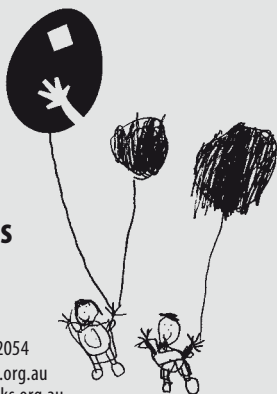
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The second of Beaman's studies involved observations of a subset of 79 teachers and their classes, looking at how teachers distributed their attention to students in the classroom, with a particular interest in how they responded to academic behaviour and social behaviour.

Beaman found that overall teachers are more approving than disapproving, however they still provide a lot of negative attention to inappropriate social behaviour.

"It is good to see that teachers are more positive than negative. Typically the teachers in the study gave seven times more approval than disapproval to academic work but on the social side they were giving six times more disapproval than approval. The research says you should really be giving four or five times as much positive attention as negative attention to shape appropriate desirable behaviour," she says.

Beaman believes that a much better option for achieving classroom harmony is to focus on appropriate and positive behaviour and to try and build those into the repertoire of a student's classroom skill-set. She notes that while negative attention will usually put a stop to troublesome behaviour when it occurs, it doesn't often reduce the behaviour in the long-term.

"Ideally what a teacher should do is to look out for appropriate behaviour and subtly draw attention to this behaviour," she says. "This is much more effective in reducing disruptions and for shaping appropriate behaviour than reprimanding students."

Beaman also suggests that having three or four positively framed classroom rules will help to shape behaviour. Starting a dialogue with students about how they'd like the classroom to be and making rules that are worded positively so students can comply are both effective ways of focusing on appropriate behaviour.

Classroom set up, according to Beaman, is also critical in shaping behaviour, and there are ecological ways of maximising good behaviour.

"Previous research in this area suggests that seating arrangement in particular is a powerful antecedent for behaviour and that it's important to organise seating so that it relates to the task," she says.

"If teachers require their students to work independently then the 'old-fashioned' way of seating them in rows rather than in small table groups has proven to be more effective. Good lighting and temperature are also very important."

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Beaman hopes that her study will provide data that informs debate on how classrooms can become more positive environments for both teachers and students.

"Schools have an obligation to make schooling as positive an experience as they can and I think it could be a lot better than it is," she says. "A lot of teachers are trying to do their jobs with their hands tied behind their backs because their teacher preparation generally doesn't equip them with the skills that are required to shape more positive classroom behaviour."

"Dealing with these types of behaviour day in and day out is very wearing. Classroom behaviour management is one of the main reasons teachers leave the profession and a significant factor in student disengagement."

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