Introduction: embracing positive rules as a teacher

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The purpose of this book is to help you better understand the context of the behaviour of children and adolescents in educational settings. This knowledge will benefit how you respond to student conduct in practice. The chapters in this book explore key aspects of this overarching aim; they specifically address the following themes.

- **Chapter 1:** How we can set a climate in our classroom that promotes positive behaviour, and focuses on how we build productive, warm and positive relationships with students.
- **Chapter 2:** How educationally relevant theory can be a highly practical aid to help educators understand the 'real world' of the classroom. This chapter highlights how theory-informed approaches, such as restorative justice, could be of real benefit in responding to children with disruptive or challenging behaviour.
- **Chapter 3:** How considering what children's behaviours might actually disclose is important (does this child have SEBD – social, emotional or behavioural difficulties? Is this a mental-health issue?). This chapter shows how we can use a structured set of questions to help us decide how we, as teachers, our colleagues and the education setting should support each student.
- **Chapter 4:** What factors should be considered when assessing children's conduct and working with other professionals involved improving the behaviour of children.
- **Chapter 5:** How we can use a range of specific, highly practical, interpersonal strategies, such as *withitness*, *overlapping* and *group alerting*, to minimise negative behaviours in the classroom. In doing this, we can avoid the need to be reactive and therefore maintain a positive environment for learning.

- **Chapter 6:** How research might realistically figure in relation to what we do in our practice, including guidance on what specific types of systematic interventions have proven to be effective by research.
- **Chapter 7:** How considering our personal welfare in our response to student conduct is an essential professional issue and what teacher wellbeing might mean in our practice.

Understanding Child and Adolescent Behaviour in the Classroom intends to be a positive alternative to many publications that frame children's behaviour primarily in terms of 'behaviour management'. Our intention as authors is to encourage educators to think more broadly about behaviour, relationships and the importance of encouraging behaviour for learning. This book offers alternative suggestions for thinking about how you can design and deliver the best possible experience for your students by employing a professional practice that is effective, research-informed, flexible and ethical.

Readers might also note that we use the terms 'children', 'adolescents', 'students' and 'pupils' in this book. We also refer to 'educators' and 'teachers' interchangeably, thus avoiding any strict definition. Likewise, 'behaviour' and 'conduct' are both used as descriptive terms. In using an expansive vocabulary, we aim to add variety in order to reach a wide audience of professionals who help children to develop and learn in educational settings across the English-speaking world.

Who is this book for?

This book is specifically relevant to the following professionals:

- pre-service teachers and students who are enrolled in initial teacher education (ITE) courses, or other training or study, leading to a professional career in education
- people who are new to the education profession or who are re-entering it after a career break
- practising educators who want to refresh, improve or develop their knowledge of child and adolescent behaviour.

This material is designed to be an indispensable support for any reader who belongs in one of the above categories. In these chapters, we also recognise the numerous types of professionals who are increasingly involved in supporting children's welfare across the English-speaking world and beyond. *Understanding Child and Adolescent Behaviour* is a resource for those intending to enter, or who currently practise in, a range of professions involved with children or adolescents. These professions include the following ones:

- social work
- psychology and educational psychology
- mental-health professionals
- behaviour-support specialists.

Why is this book relevant?

All of the contributors to this book have served as highly successful teachers who practise collectively across a very wide range of educative contexts including these areas:

- special education and other specialist settings
- early years/pre-school settings
- mainstream primary schools and secondary (or high) schools
- further, TAFE, tertiary and higher-education settings.

To help you to think more deeply and widely about children's behaviour, we have drawn from our numerous years of working as practising educators to present ideas that assist you in framing your experience of student conduct. Some of the authors' backgrounds include extensive cross-professional experience, such as having worked as an educational psychologist or in multidisciplinary settings with allied professionals (including social workers and psychiatrists). The richness in these authors' backgrounds reflects how this book encourages you to see the 'big picture' in terms of student conduct. Insights are presented from the perspective of disciplines including child development, educational psychology, philosophy, and clinical, or specialist, practice to help reveal the big picture to you.

Why is behaviour in schools and in classrooms relevant?

To answer this question for yourself, we suggest that you search the terms 'pupil behaviour' or 'student behaviour' on the internet. You will probably discover a host of articles in the news and local, or national, educational policies that reference children's behaviours in educational settings. These articles will most likely range from sober, official, policy-based, accounts of behaviour by government agencies or teaching organisations to populist articles or online blogs about the impact of 'poor behaviour' including claims that children's behaviour is rapidly declining to the point of crisis. These articles will generally be international, originating from different English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US). Concerns about children's behaviour within, or associated with, the school environment can also be heard in Hong Kong and cities across China as well as Malaysia, Singapore and India.

On one level we can consider some of these concerns in regards to the sociologist Chas Critcher's notion of recurring 'moral panics'. There are numerous reports of disruptive student behaviour that is fuelled by media stories building momentum. Therefore, these moral panics are based more in political perceptions and contemporary media antics rather than on education (Critcher, 2012). However,

there is some truth to negative behaviour in classrooms causing problems in the contemporary classroom. The consequences of these difficulties are:

- educator welfare under threat (including health issues) as a result of dealing with low-level disruptive, or challenging, behaviour over years
- the reduction in the quality of all children's learning, their motivation to learn and the quality of their educational experience
- the ways in which low-level, disruptive, or challenging, behaviour can indicate unmet academic needs in the classroom or unrecognised social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (SEBD), or both.
- the challenge to the educator's professional expertise in facilitating an orderly and productive classroom
- an environment that feeds some children's educational disaffection, their de-motivation and negative experience of education
- the negative effect on the future outcomes of students' lives due to them having been educationally excluded due to their challenging behaviour, or children who exclude themselves from learning effectively because their needs are not being met in school
- a barrier to a positive school experience for children with a disability that affects their social, emotional or behavioural abilities and consequent ability to learn.

The conduct of children and teachers, and social justice

It is important to recognise that several of these consequences are related to social justice for some of the most vulnerable children within the education system. Although student conduct in schools might be a highly practical issue for educators, it is also a vital issue in terms of social justice and ethics across public education. It is probably a mistake (something described as a false dualism) to see ethics and practice as separate on this issue; it is better to see them as overlapping aspects that we need to consider as professional educators.

Researchers and educators have raised concerns that children with SEBD, EBD (emotional or behavioural difficulties) or disabilities affecting behaviour face exclusion or marginalisation because of an increased emphasis across the English-speaking world on school 'accountability' based on student examination results (such as NAPLAN and SATs) and academic performance. See Chapter 3 for more discussion. This is a practical issue for educators, school leaders, parents and schools but it also highlights the ethics of the educator's conduct in response and any decision they make.

This book offers guidance on key practical ways of dealing with children's and adolescent conduct (see Chapter 5 that discusses teacher expertise as an example). It also aims to help you appreciate the important ethical tensions and dilemmas

that arise in educational settings, and to face the fact that there is no 'solution' here in our professional response. We return to this issue at the start of this book's conclusion where we encourage you to take an open-minded, enquiry-led attitude to what behaviour discloses about a student's needs rather than seeing them as a problem requiring a solution.

How do we define behaviour?

In working towards a deeper, research-informed, appreciation of behaviour exhibited by children and adolescents, it is helpful to begin with a working description of what educators, parents and 'significant others' (Humphrey, 2004) in a child's life refer to when they discuss child conduct. While there are important dissenting or alternative views on this topic, 'disruptive' and 'challenging' are two influential keywords (Williams, 1983) that often shape how educators think about child or adolescent behaviour in schools. The following is a working definition of what these terms often encompass.

Disruptive (or 'unproductive') behaviour

This term usually refers to a host of minor misdemeanours that occur in the classroom. These behaviours are only limited by the imagination of the student. They often include excessive talking, being distracted or lacking attention towards the task, pointless or negative or sarcastic comments, verbal or physical joking (such as imitating the educator, or hiding under desks), causing others to lose concentration or attention, calling out and making 'silly' noises, carrying out practical jokes, irritating or 'winding up' peers, ignoring reasonable requests or instructions by adults and engaging in noncompliant behaviour. For further details, see *Behaviour in Scottish Schools 2009* (Munn et al, 2009), where the authors gathered information from a large number of educators (1000 +) about what they regarded as disruptive behaviours.

Challenging behaviour

This term usually refers to serious, difficult or dangerous misconduct. This frequently includes one or more of the following: violent or aggressive behaviours towards peers, including physical intimidation and verbal aggression; challenging the educator's authority in an open, confrontational way; serious physical assault of an educator or of peers (such as punching, kicking, biting, scratching, clubbing, stabbing or shooting others); use of weapons (including knives, guns and tools such as hammers) against staff or peers, or the threat to use these weapons; intentional, wilful damage of others' property or of the school including arson (refer to a study by Westling 2010, who surveyed 71 US teachers about what they regarded as challenging behaviours).

Some observations on 'disruptive behaviour' and 'challenging behaviour'

The 'disruptive' and 'challenging' categories of behaviour that have been outlined here might be helpful for schools in the narrow sense of labelling children's behaviours after they have happened. An example would be in the case of preparing official documents that record or log at-risk behaviours that form the basis for decision making and actions by the school. However this labelling of behaviour has many major limitations; this book intends to help you appreciate the limitations of terms used for a child's and adolescent's behaviour and thereby to enrich your understanding and practice. See Chapter 2 for a further discussion of disruptive behaviour.

Here a list of relatively common behaviours that are not clearly labelled as disruptive or challenging and they are sometimes missed in discussions about children's conduct. After reading this list, you might consider whether children who exhibit these behaviours warrant our support and attention as much as those who call out in class, or who are defiant or challenging in their behaviour. These common behaviours are:

- bullying (particularly in its more subtle forms)
- social withdrawal, where a child withdraws from their usual social groupings and becomes increasingly uncommunicative and withdrawn
- an obvious collapse in a child's confidence about their ability and self-worth
- low mood, where a child appears to be 'depressed' or has a marked change in self-regard
- increased anxiety, where a child appears to be increasingly anxious and agitated
- increased anger, where a child appears more angry for an unknown reason, but they do not currently express this in their behaviour towards others
- increased tearfulness, where a child cries more and is emotionally charged for no clear reason
- an inability to cope, where a child clearly cannot function emotionally in a setting and often their reaction negatively impacts on their welfare and class attendance
- lack of empathy, where a child shows a concerning lack of empathy for others but does not display disruptive or challenging behaviour
- boredom and demotivation, where a child reacts in this way because the level of work they have been set is too low or too challenging for them to attempt
- trauma signs, where a child can't self-regulate their emotions, regresses socially or intellectually, withdraws, is sad, irritable or anxious, has poor concentration, is distrusting or has trouble learning generally.

An observation that can be made in terms of these listed behaviours is that it might be helpful for educators to think *differently* about how children act in schools, and how they as educators can develop ways that avoid the possible constraints of disruptive or challenging terminology (see Chapter 2 which discusses 'disruptive' behaviour in further detail).

Critics of labels such as 'disruptive behaviour' and 'challenging behaviour' have argued that while these are convenient for educational settings, they are often used to exclude affected children, who can be disabled and highly vulnerable. Disruptive behaviour and challenging behaviour draw the educator's attention away from consideration of how settings can cater for children with diverse social, emotional or academic needs. By emphasing that the 'disruption' emanates from the student, other environmental factors are avoided in discussion. This unhelpful avoidance can include an honest evaluation by professionals about whether they need further support from colleagues in meeting the student's needs.

Alternative views of behaviour for educators

Psychology is one source for an alternative framework in thinking about behaviour (see also Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and Chapter 6). Psychologists have suggested that behaviour can be categorised into two related categories: *internalising* and *externalising*. These are used in influential assessment of behaviour problems such as Achenbach's Youth Self-Report (Achenbach, 1991). There is debate in the disciplines of psychiatry and in clinical psychology over the extent to which these two categories overlap or influence each other, or both, but they are regarded as productive for thinking about behaviour. In an important international review of mental-health problems in children and young people, Bayer et al (2012) comment that: 'mental health problems consist primarily of internalising (anxiety, depression) and externalising (aggression, oppositional defiance) problems. They pose a public health issue affecting up to a quarter of youth in Australian and international populations' (659).

Bayer et al (2012) go on to emphasise how mental-health problems, often mislabelled by adults as behavioural issues, can affect children from mid- to late-primary education, commenting that: 'These also happen across age ranges before 14 and in some cases by 11 years of age' (659).

Chapter 3 proposes a positive alternative to labelling children as disruptive or challenging. It proposes that we should establish a framework of behaviours for students in terms of questioning if the behaviours warrant our concern about that student's welfare. Adult concerns about the welfare of a child or young person are described as the trigger for starting a structured decision-making process that beneficially informs those key decisions that educators and their colleagues have to make when responding to their concerns. A major advantage of taking this

approach, and in adopting the recommended process of which it is a part, is that it is harmonious with:

- child-protection policy and practices, including safeguarding
- mental-health policy, including the timely identification and referral of students at risk of mental-health difficulties
- inclusive practices that meet the varied needs of a wide range of children experiencing psychological difficulty but whose behaviour does not fit within the limits of the disruptive or challenging labels.

This working definition can be used to understand where a child might fit into the range of severity of conduct. Insight can then be employed to work through a structured process of enquiry and decision making that accommodates mental-health difficulties, abuse/neglect (safeguarding) or other important categories/labels that explain a child's conduct. One advantage of this working definition is that it is also applies to children whose behaviour does not neatly fit in the disruptive or challenging boxes, as discussed earlier in this introduction.

Where does research fit into child and adolescent behaviour?

We hope that this book is a starting point for informing, or refreshing, your own views on this topic. Chapter 6 discusses how research might relate to your own practice and offers guidance and suggestions on some of the positive and negative implications of practitioner research (research conducted by professionals in their setting typically based on local issues) on the topic of student behaviour. In Chapter 6 we also highlight what international research indicates as characteristics of good-quality, sustainable professional learning. This investment in your own knowledge and skills is a vital, but often highly variable, experience for educators in their career. We offer guidance on the features to look for when you are selecting professional learning activities or programs.

This publication also provides an accessible, concise overview of current research and scholarship that is relevant to thinking about student behaviour in educational settings. It should be emphasised that this book is a selective glimpse into what is a varied and rich area of enquiry.

An overview of current research

The following areas are some of the diverse ways in which research has examined behaviour in ways that are educationally relevant over the last 25 years.

Genetic or biological research: this includes epidemiological-based (whole population) studies of child and adolescent behaviour; family-based studies of behaviour (for example, are there any common genetic markers for behavioural

difficulties when it affects families); genetic markers among biological parents for specific conditions or disabilities affecting conduct such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or conduct disorder (CD); behaviour and gender (for example, the connection between boys and aggression); connections between physical environmental factors such as the presence of lead and its brain-altering effects and impact on children's behaviour.

Neuropsychological research: this includes the role of specific brain areas, such as the prefrontal cortex (PFC) in moderating aggressive conduct in children; EEG- and fMRI-based studies of brain function in those with behavioural difficulties or who are developing atypically; the relationships between brain function or brain structures and conditions that significantly affect children's behaviour such as depression or psychosis; the nature of acquired disabilities affecting children's behaviour (for example, injuries due to a Road Traffic Accident or head trauma of another cause); the adverse influence of neglect, abuse or poverty, or a mixture of these effects, on brain areas that are key for social and emotional development.

Psychological research: this includes the psychological impact of conditions such as autism on a child and in terms of what we observe in their behaviours; the suitability of specific forms of assessment (such as psychometric tests) to identify behavioural disorders and assess children's behaviour; connections between cognition (understanding the world around us) and aspects of behaviour; social learning and behavioural development; relationships between behavioural difficulties and disorders affecting receptive or expressive oral language such as specific language impairment (SLI) or dyslexia; the role of attachment (the bond formed between a baby and their mother or carer) in children's later behavioural development (such as what role an 'insecure' attachment-type of bond has in predicting later behavioural issues for a child); aspects of personality and behaviour; child or adolescent behaviour and mental-health disorders such as early-onset conduct disorder or childhood anxiety and how they present in educational settings; connections between sleep disorders/poor sleep and problem behaviours in children; parenting 'styles' and their effects on children's behaviour; the impact of trauma on children's socio-emotional development.

Research in educational psychology: this includes teacher attitudes towards student behaviour and connections with teacher behaviour; psychological impact on children who are labelled with social emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) or with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD); the validity or reliability of labels such as SEBD and EBD; teacher knowledge of effective strategies to deal with disruptive or challenging behaviour; aspects of practice by educational or school psychologists in directly supporting children affected by SEBD; educational policy focused on affected children; evaluation of interventions with those affected by SEBD such as nurture groups or cognitive behavioural therapy; multidisciplinary practice (educator–school psychologist; educator–speech and language pathologist, or therapist) in supporting positive classroom behaviours; the role of educational

psychologists in supporting educators in professional learning about child and adolescent behaviour; evaluation of services associated with behavioural support in schools, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS); the psychological and behavioural impacts of being bullied; the psychological or behavioural profile of those children or adolescents who are likely to bully; the nature of self-esteem, self-concept, locus of control and other features of a child's self-system and their relationship with behaviours deemed conducive to learning such as high motivation or resilience.

Educational research: this includes evaluation of educational practice and policy initiatives relating to children's behaviour; the relationship between educational inclusion and student behaviour in education settings; the fate of children who are educationally excluded; national or local or state educational policies relating to child or adolescent behaviour; teacher expertise (what it consists of, how it is applied) in relation to student behaviour; professional roles in supporting children with SEBD; literacy and behaviour; evaluation of interventions such as functional behavioural analysis (FBA) or nurture groups designed to support positive behaviour; pre-service or initial teacher education and whether it adequately prepares undergraduates for the profession in terms of classroom management of behaviour; alternative provision for children with SEBD or EBD; how the curriculum can best accommodate children with disabilities that affect behaviour such as autism; school policies concerning student conduct and whether educators are aware of them, use them or find them useful; the influence of school or college leaders and leadership itself on student conduct; how or if school or college leaders support educators in the classroom in response to disruptive behaviour; educator welfare in response to student behaviour (are educators leaving the profession or suffering from health issues due to disruptive student behaviour); how the physical environment, such as size and layout of a classrooom or characteristics of outdoor play areas, can encourage particular behaviours by students or by staff; and bullying and SEBD.

Educational Sociology/sociology of education research: this includes connections between behaviour and forms of disability; links between the quality of peer relationships and student behaviour; social inclusion and positive behaviour in schools; institutional studies of the school and how it encourages or discourages particular attitudes or behaviours or both; perceptions of behaviour and of deviance from social norms; historical studies of the construction of deviant social groups (women, children, ethnic minorities); indigenous education and behaviour such as trends in the number of students from an indigenous background (or from a minority ethnic group) who are excluded at a national level on account of behaviour, e.g. application of behaviour policies to indigenous students by educators; the family context of behaviour and social norms; socio-economic deprivation/low SES and links with children receiving behavioural support; the effect of educational policy on the school ecology and its environment; connections between educator gender and behaviour displayed by boys; longitudinal (long-term) studies that explore the prevalence of children with SEBD or those who are described as disruptive by their teachers in the prison population.