

Anna Sullivan · Bruce Johnson
Bill Lucas *Editors*

Challenging Dominant Views on Student Behaviour at School

Answering Back

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Springer

Editors

Anna Sullivan
School of Education
University of South Australia
Adelaide, SA, Australia

Bruce Johnson
School of Education
University of South Australia
Adelaide, SA, Australia

Bill Lucas
University of South Australia
Adelaide, SA, Australia

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Why It Is Important to Answer Back

Anna Sullivan

Abstract This chapter presents an overview of the book and outlines its purposes. Firstly, it examines why there is a problem with the dominant views on student behaviour in schools. Secondly, it argues that the prevailing views of student behaviour in schools are about law and order to ensure safety, but that they ignore the complexity of behaviour, and the rights of individual students. These prevailing views are influencing policy and practice. To help understand the dominant thinking about behaviour in schools and to explore some ethical alternatives, this chapter describes the Australian policy context by outlining the background for the book. It then provides brief descriptions of each chapter and how they suggest new ways to ‘answer back’ to calls for more authoritarian responses to student behaviour within our schools.

Introduction

Every child is worthwhile. There is no such thing as a bad child. Unfortunately sometimes they’ll just do a wrong action. (Tim, secondary teacher, Bethlehem College, BaSS interview)¹

To improve student behaviour and learning outcomes we need three things more than anything else. Very simply: 1. bring back the cane. 2. reduce the number of (mostly) do-gooder feminists who are in leadership positions both in [department head office] and schools who pander to students’ rights rather than their responsibilities, are full of their own theories and agendas, but are too often hopeless when it comes to the practicalities of disciplining students and running a school effectively. I see this far too often. 3. Resuscitate the disciplinarian principal (an almost extinct species) and both mould and appoint this type of person as the head of school. (Cindy, secondary teacher, BaSS teacher survey)

Views about student behaviour in schools are diverse but the dominant view that prevails in countries like Australia is similar to that expressed by Cindy. That is, teachers and compliant students should not have to tolerate non-compliant students.

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A. Sullivan (✉)
School of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA, Australia
e-mail: anna.sullivan@unisa.edu.au

‘Tough’ principals need to take control and punish students who do not behave. Although in the minority, there is an alternate view about student behaviour in schools, which I believe deserves further examination. This view is reflected by Tim, who acknowledges the complexity of behaviour and the educative and caring role that schools can play in supporting students to prevent and respond to inappropriate behaviour.

The intent of this book is to examine and challenge dominant thinking about student behaviour in schools and to consider ethical alternatives. It acknowledges that schools worldwide are under increased pressure to ‘control’ student behaviour to ensure ‘good order’. This pressure is mounting in many countries, as there is a growing sense of social and moral panic about students’ behaviour in schools (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012). The media reflect society’s unease by consistently reporting widespread public and political concern over allegedly negative and deteriorating student behaviour in schools (e.g. Ali 2015; Cameron 2010; Donnelly 2014; Lawson 2015; Paton 2014). Calls for schools to ‘get tough’ with inappropriate student behaviour abound (e.g. Donnelly 2014; Post Editorial Board 2015; Sellgren 2014). However, there are also competing calls for schools to deal with inappropriate behaviour in ways that are more ‘humane’ (O’Brien 2015; Wilkie 2015; Williams 2014). An alternative perspective to the ‘law and order’ view of managing student behaviour draws on more liberal approaches that respect students’ human dignity, treat students fairly rather than equally, and guide the development of pro-social skills that promote educational rather than managerial discourses related to behaviour (Slee 1995).

Student behaviour at school is a problematic and contested field of inquiry in which many interest groups have a stake. Not surprisingly, discourse about student behaviour frequently moves beyond the research base to reflect deep ideological differences about, for example, the status of children in society, the role of schools and families in teaching children to be sociable and cooperative, and what actions are seen as appropriate and legitimate when ‘disciplining’ children and adolescents (Johnson et al. 1994).

Ideology inevitably drives political decisions on policy development. For example, in the US, the 2001 ‘No Child Left Behind’ federal legislation included ‘a zero tolerance policy that requires the expulsion of students for up to one year if they commit certain violent or drug-related offenses’ (Kennedy-Lewis 2013, p. 165). All states adopted this legislation and expanded it to develop very comprehensive zero tolerance policies for schools (Kennedy-Lewis 2013). However, following increasing evidence that such zero tolerance policies and practices, especially suspensions and exclusions, have had devastating effects on marginalised groups (e.g. Noguera 2003; Skiba et al. 2014), these policies and practices are being challenged. The US Department of Education, led by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, is now calling on states and schools across the country to rethink their approaches to school discipline (St George 2014). The Department of Education now states that

Teachers and students deserve school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to teaching and learning. Creating a supportive school climate – and decreasing suspensions and expulsions – requires close attention to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students. (US Department of Education 2015)

In England, ensuring that students are controlled and compliant is also a political issue. For example, the previous Education Secretary, Michael Gove, called on teachers not to ‘be afraid to get tough on bad behaviour and use these punishments’ (*The Guardian* 2014). Announcements from the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) continually indicate that there is a problem with student behaviour in English schools. Ofsted has argued that school leaders are ‘not doing enough to ensure high standards of pupil behaviour’ (2014, p. 1). More recently, the newly selected Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, appointed Tom Bennett ‘to help teachers better deal with minor misdemeanours’ (Mason 2015). Tom Bennett, an ex-teacher and ‘behaviour expert’, has been described as a ‘behaviour tsar’ or dictator who will crack down on behaviour (Jenkins 2015).

Underlying many of these policy debates and decisions is what Kennedy-Lewis calls a ‘discourse of safety’ (2013, p. 170). A discourse of safety focuses on creating ‘safer’ schools in which more teaching and learning can take place ‘by prioritizing the needs of the group over the needs of individuals’ (p. 170). Unfortunately, she argues, such discourses tend to define the role of schools narrowly as

developing academic, but not behavioral, skills. Students are portrayed as rational actors who deserve the punishment meted out by educators when students choose to behave disruptively; and educators have absolute power and their decisions regarding student discipline are reflected as being consistent and objective. (Kennedy-Lewis 2013, p. 165)

A discourse of safety leads to the construction of ‘behaviour problems’ as individual issues, ignoring broader systematic and contextual influences, and leads to responses that are standardised (Winton and Tuters 2015). This book challenges the tendency for educators to attribute most responsibility for ‘problem’ behaviour to their students, their families and their communities. It presents research that provides examples of alternate ways that the system, schools and educators can reject the need for more power to ‘control’ students using punitive ‘law and order’ responses.

With a narrow political focus on addressing problem behaviour and providing safe schools for students, in many countries ‘policy is being informed by ideology not evidence ... Policy makers have particular agendas for which they selectively seek justification, often post hoc, as much as “evidence” or look for simple solutions to complex problems’ (Blackmore 2014, p. 504). To help solve the problem of poor behaviour in schools, governments enlist ‘tsars’, ‘gurus’ and other policy influencers as a simplistic solution to address a complex issue. Missing from this discourse and related policy decisions is a ‘discourse of equity’ which

considers the role of social forces in creating uneven starting points for students; positions noncompliant behavior as an indication of an issue that does not lie within the child but that needs to be deeply examined; and advocates for disciplinary responses that support children’s holistic needs. This discourse positions society as responsible for addressing

disparate group outcomes, which are seen as resulting from systematic, institutionalized practices rather than from personal, individual failings. (Kennedy-Lewis 2013, p. 170)

In searching for ways in which policy and practice can better meet the needs of all students, a focus on equity offers a way to help (re)frame the discourse.

This book examines the prevailing dominant views on student behaviour at school and presents ethical, equitable and humane alternatives for related policy and practice. This book focuses on Australian research to provide a rich account of issues related to behaviour in schools and possible ways to ‘answer back’, within a complex policy context. However, before I describe how this book is organised, I would like to provide some background to help illuminate the current context in Australia.

The Australian Context

In 2013 I was lead researcher on an Australian Research Council study investigating behaviour in schools. We completed the first phase of the study, which investigated the extent to which student behaviour is a concern for school teachers (Sullivan et al. 2013, 2014). The results of this phase suggested that low-level disruptive and disengaged student behaviours occur frequently in classrooms and that teachers find these behaviours difficult to manage. However, the research showed that aggressive and anti-social behaviours occur infrequently. Interestingly, the results indicated that teachers employ strategies to manage unproductive behaviours that locate the ‘problem’ with the student. We argued that teachers could benefit from understanding how the classroom ecology affects student behaviour rather than focusing on ‘fixing’ unproductive behaviour. My colleagues and I have since developed a model to help explain the three most powerful influences on student behaviour: the classroom, school and broader society (see Fig. 1.1) (Sullivan et al. 2014b). Considering student behaviour from this socio-cultural theoretically framed model opens up opportunities for more nuanced understandings of the complexities of student behaviour.

In 2014 we were conducting the second phase of the study, which involved investigating five schools that were nominated by senior education leaders as ‘doing behaviour policy well’. We collected data to find out how the schools brought together the many policies related to student behaviour in a coherent way to support students. Our data analysis showed that these schools did this complex policy work well. School leaders, guided by clear principles and values that foregrounded the rights of students, orchestrated the collective efforts of staff. The leaders had an enduring commitment to rejecting deficit views of students and their families and continually emphasised student engagement rather than behaviour management. These attitudes helped focus attention and discourse away from student behaviour towards an engaging and caring approach to teaching and learning (see Chap. 11 for more details).

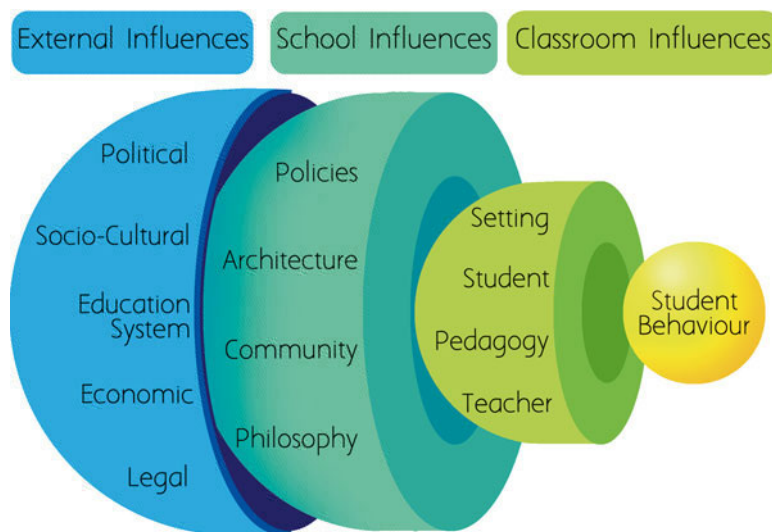


Fig. 1.1 Influences on student behaviour in schools (Sullivan et al. 2014b)

At this time, Australia, like other countries, was grappling with concerns about children and their rights in schools. Whilst we were conducting this research, three main political events occurred that either promoted or undermined the rights of children in Australia. Before I describe these events, it is important to note that Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. Of particular relevance to school discipline and student behaviour is Article 28 of the convention: ‘States Parties recognize the right of the child to education ... States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child’s human dignity’. Now to the events.

First, the federal government introduced legislation and appointed the first National Children’s Commissioner in February 2013 to work within the Australian Human Rights Commission. The commissioner’s role is to promote the rights of Australian children in policy and practice (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2015). This was an important position because it provided ‘children with an independent voice which aims to uphold children’s rights. A commission’s independence from government is important for providing children with a representative body solely concerned with protecting and promoting their rights, without other political influences’ (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2015).

Second, the South Australian government was considering appointing a Commissioner for Children and Young People who would have a legislative mandate to ‘promote awareness of the rights, views and interests of all children’ (ABC News 2013). At this time, South Australia was the only state in Australia not to have made such an appointment. This intention was a response to the DeBelle Royal Commission into the handling of a sexual abuse case at an Adelaide school (South Australia Independent Education Inquiry and DeBelle 2013), largely to reassure the

public that children in schools were safe (ABC News 2013). Interestingly, 2 years on, this legislation has yet to pass.

Third, whilst these initiatives were aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of children, the Queensland government introduced new legislation called Strengthening Discipline in State Schools Amendment Bill. This legislation would provide principals with more 'disciplinary powers including out of school hour detentions and power to punish students for acts committed beyond the school gate' (Remeikis 2013). The University of Queensland's School of Education was highly critical of this amendment, suggesting that the Bill might breach Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (School of Education, University of Queensland 2013). The submission argued that the 'proposed changes to student discipline policies and procedures only offer punitive measures'. Furthermore, it argued, 'the proposed procedures are more akin to criminal codes than policies designed to increase engagement in learning' (p. 3). Mills and Pini have argued that the Queensland government responsible for these legislative changes was acting in accordance with its wish to be 'seen to be tough on problem students' (2014, p. 271). Nevertheless, the legislation passed and became effective from January 2014. The government proudly announced a 'Green light for tougher school discipline powers' (Langbroek 2013).

As these events unfolded, we became interested in the rights of children in schools and concerned that students were being portrayed as needing to be controlled through punitive measures and with little regard to research informing policy and practice. The University of Queensland's damning submission related to the proposed legislative changes in Queensland occurred at the same time we were collecting data from schools that did not rely on punitive sanctions to manage student behaviour. We were concerned about the conflicting messages related to the rights of children and ongoing debates about how children should be managed and protected.

Additionally, we started to consider more seriously whether the taken-for-granted practices that occur in schools might in fact breach the rights of children. For example, all children have a right to an education, yet a very common technique used to manage behaviour in Australian schools is to remove students from their learning. Often schools use exclusion practices that increase in severity. These 'stepped' approaches typically begin with a warning, in-class time-out, out-of-class time-out, intervention by a school leader, suspension and exclusion (see Fig. 1.2). Use of this type of system is extremely prevalent. In fact, 85 % of teachers in a recent survey indicated that they had used a 'step' system involving an escalation of actions during the last week of teaching (Sullivan et al. 2014a). We know from research that 'little evidence supports punitive and exclusionary approaches' (Osher et al. 2010, p. 48). More importantly, if used regularly, removing students from their learning as a behaviour management practice probably violates a child's right to an education.

Another longstanding practice used in schools is the 'ripple effect' (Kounin and Gump 1958) to influence student behaviour. For example, teachers often reprimand students in front of others, or keep public records of students who are compliant or non-compliant. Charts, lists, posters and electronic records are commonplace in



Fig. 1.2 Step system and public record

classrooms (see Figs 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4). Teachers use such practices to coerce other students to ‘behave’. However, if we consider that children have a right to be treated with dignity, using discipline techniques that humiliate, shame or chasten students in public ways in order to influence the behaviour of other children might in fact breach this right.



Fig. 1.3 Public record regarding quality of student behaviour

Behaviour in Australian Schools National Summit

In response to these concerns, my colleagues and I decided to host a national summit to raise the profile of children and their rights as students in schools. We wanted to bring people together in a forum that would be provocative and raise questions about the pressing issue of student behaviour in schools, a topic at the centre of much public and political debate in Australia and internationally. The summit centred round a public lecture entitled 'Rights of children in schools: a human rights perspective on behaviour' given by Megan Mitchell, National Children's

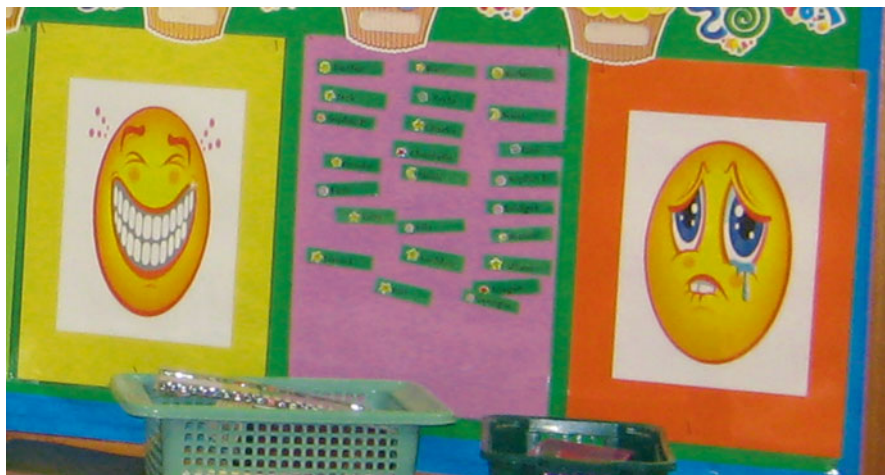


Fig. 1.4 Appropriate behaviour (smiley face) and inappropriate behaviour (sad face) public record

Commissioner. In this lecture, Mitchell discussed the status of children and their rights as students in schools, which was particularly pertinent given the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2014. The summit also involved a conference aimed at challenging dominant thinking about behaviour and promoting humanistic and inclusive policies and practices in schools.

This book is an outcome of the summit. It addresses the following key questions:

- What ideas dominate current thinking about student behaviour at school?
- What are the policy drivers for current practices?
- What is wrong with common behaviour approaches?
- What key ideologies justify these approaches?
- How can we present ethical alternatives to current approaches?
- How can a human rights perspective contribute to the development of alternative approaches?

How This Book Is Organised

There are 12 chapters in this book. In this Chapter, ‘Introduction: Why it is important to answer back’, I have provided some background about why this book is important. I have argued that the prevailing discourse related to student behaviour reflects a law and order, controlling approach. It favours placing responsibility for problematic behaviour on individual students and ignores other influences. Given

that decisions about policies are often made based on ideological beliefs that reflect these discourses, research-informed decisions are often lacking. I have described the Australian context, which illustrates these issues and led to the conceptualisation of this book.

In Chap. 2, 'Daring to disagree about school "discipline": An Australian case study of a media-led backlash', Bruce Johnson presents many of the problems academics face when they share research as a way to 'answer back' in the media. Johnson analyses public responses on social media to a television interview about academic research on school discipline and behaviour. The backlash was harsh as prevailing comments were 'anti-intellectual' in their nature; played off the rights of the individual versus the rights of the group; and contended that punishment works and is needed in schools. He argues that academics *should* engage with the media. However, they need to be sophisticated in their approaches to bring about more informed public awareness of effective ways to respond to student behaviour in schools.

In Chap. 3, 'Understanding and challenging dominant discourses about student behaviour at school', Bruce Johnson and I examine the different discourses related to student behaviour. We argue that the dominant authoritarian discourse relates to a need to control students to ensure good order in schools. We examine why this discourse continues to have such strong traction. Then we provide a case study of a school that enacted behaviour-related policies in ways that interrupted the dominant authoritarian discourses and placed student wellbeing and engagement at the centre of its work.

In Chap. 4, 'Promoting pedagogies of engagement in secondary schools: possibilities for pedagogical reform', Rob Hattam and I argue that schools need to take their contexts seriously in order to redesign curriculum and enact pedagogies of engagement. We describe the school as a 'logic machine' to provide a new way of examining what is happening in secondary schools. Examining the logics, or taken-for-granted views, related to school organisation, school culture and pedagogy provides a framework to consider school reform. We argue that secondary schools can 'move beyond focusing on "managing" student behaviour to promoting pedagogies of engagement'.

In Chap. 5, 'Goodbye Mr Chips, hello Dr Phil?', Roger Slee provides a historical account of the emergence of 'problem' behaviours in schools and the associated technologies and justifications for dealing with these behaviours. He describes the abolition of corporal punishment and the resulting increase in other 'punitive and behaviourist responses to student disruption' including suspensions and the growth of dedicated 'behaviour' schools. Subsequently, there has been a move to 'benign pastoral and psychological approaches'. More recently, problem behaviour has been treated as a 'pathological dysfunction'. Slee contends that all of these changes locate the source of behaviour problems as residing within the student and that the student requires controlling. He argues that school discipline 'had been cast as a problem of power and control' rather than an 'educational challenge'. Viewing discipline as an educational process offers a way forward.

In Chap. 6, ‘Rethinking mis/behaviour in schools: From “youth as a problem” to the “relational school”’, Barry Down utilises the case of Western Australia to discuss some of the historical and discursive practices that have led youth to be viewed as a ‘problem’ and in need of fixing by the state. Down warns against psychologised solutions. He calls for a reimagining of the school and a move away from a focus on ‘youth as a problem’ to consider ‘the problem of schooling’. This chapter is important because it challenges the perceptions of (mis)behaviour in schools and calls for alternative possibilities that intentionally and strategically focus on the relational. Down argues that ‘schools need to become far more hospitable places for learning for all students. Schools need to be places where students can flourish free from intimidation, fear, anxiety, threats and retribution.’

In Chap. 7, ‘Reframing “behaviour” in schools: the role of recognition in improving student wellbeing’, Anne Graham, Julia Truscott, Mary Ann Powell and Donnah Anderson challenge the ways in which behaviour, and thus the child, are typically ‘positioned as the “problem”’. They draw on a large research project that examined wellbeing in schools to consider how recognition theory can offer an alternative way to consider student and teacher behaviour. They identify three dimensions of recognition – ‘cared for’, ‘respected’ and ‘valued’ – and use them as a framework for analysis. The authors report that relationships and recognition are very important. This is not surprising, but they also explain that the routine aspects of school life are important, especially to children. Finally, the authors argue that ‘framing problematic behaviour as a *struggle for recognition* or as a reaction to *misrecognition* offers a different paradigm through which to view behaviour and our responses to it’.

In Chap. 8, ‘“Schoolwork” and “teachers”: disaffected boys talk about their problems with school’, Linda J. Graham gives a voice to students who have been marginalised from ‘mainstream’ schools and placed in special ‘behaviour’ schools because they have been deemed severely disruptive. She draws on Nodding’s (2001) two main descriptions of care: ‘care as virtue’, that is, the type of care that most teachers think is relevant; and ‘relational care’, which is the type of care students are seeking. The research findings show that the students began to have problems in the first 3 years of schooling. They identified their main problems as those related to teachers focusing on care as a virtue rather than on relational care. These students found their schoolwork too difficult or boring, and their teachers to be very demanding, coercive and unfair. Graham argues that more complex solutions are required to attend to the problem of disruptive student behaviour. Solutions should focus on caring for each student at an early stage.

In Chap. 9, ‘Beyond the “habits” of “punishing, criticising and nagging”: fostering respectful and socially just student relations using critical pedagogies’, Amanda Keddie argues that punitive responses to student ‘misbehaviour’ are inadequate. Such responses individualise the behaviour, ‘do little to engage students’ and ‘render students with little power or agency’ and are therefore harmful. Keddie presents an alternative pedagogical approach drawing on the Productive Pedagogies model (Hayes et al. 2006). She offers a case study of a deputy principal who attempts to work with students, particularly boys, using respectful and critical pedagogies. This