Punish them or engage them?

Insights from a major Australian study of student behaviour in schools

Anna Sullivan & Bruce Johnson
You’ve seen the headlines, but what’s your experience?

• Discuss issues related to student behaviour in your school, sector and more broadly.
• How do you feel when you see headlines like these?
• Have you had any issues reported in the media?
• How do such headlines impact on the staff and broader community in your school?

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Behaviour at school:

- Social and ‘moral panic’ over young peoples’ behaviour
- Perennial concern
- ‘Out-of-control’ rhetoric in media
- Political concerns and opportunities eg links to ‘law and order’
- School concern and opportunities - ‘big business’ promoting safe and orderly, ‘well disciplined’ schools

Yet, research indicates the extent of the ‘problem’ has been overplayed.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
The Research Team

Dr Anna Sullivan (Project Leader)
Professor Bruce Johnson
Professor Larry Owens
Emeritus Professor Bob Conway
Bill Lucas (since 2013)

Dr Carmel Taddeo (RA – 2012)
Dr Melanie Baak (RA – 2013)
Significance of this Research

• A well-established link between student engagement, student behaviour and academic achievement.

Student Behaviour

- Problematic and contested field of enquiry
  - Many interest groups
  - Ideological differences
    - Status of children
    - Role of schools vs. family
    - Appropriate discipline actions

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Types of Behaviour Policies

- Policies, initiatives, procedures & strategies
- There are many types of behaviour related policies eg:
  - Anti-bullying
  - Attendance and timekeeping
  - Child protection
  - Drugs education & prevention
  - Student wellbeing
  -Suspension & exclusion
  - Uniform

(Ball et al, 2011)

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
• Greatest concern to teachers, especially early career teachers
• Negative implications of poor classroom management
  • Student resistance, misbehaviour, school violence, lower student achievement
• Media Interest
  • Reflects and exacerbates public and political concern
Elton Enquiry in UK (1989)

- Response to media reports and professional association concerns.

- Findings: Most problematic behaviours were relatively trivial but persistent.
  - e.g., talking out of turn, hindering others, calculated idleness or work avoidance, verbal abuse of other students.
South Australian Studies (Johnson, et. al, 1991-3)

- Used modified Elton questionnaire
- 5000+ teachers (all sectors and year levels)
  - Survey 1: Discipline in Metropolitan Schools
  - Survey 2: Discipline in Country Schools
  - Survey 3: Discipline in Independent Schools
Findings similar to Elton Enquiry:

- Consistent pattern of minor discipline problems e.g., idleness and work avoidance; hindering others; talking out of turn.
- Serious behaviours uncommon, e.g., physical destructiveness, aggression i.e., debunked the widespread perception that students were ‘out of control’ across system.
- Nevertheless, many teachers faced frequent & persistent minor discipline issues which impeded learning and contributed to teacher stress.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Beaman and Wheldall Study (1997)

- Studied teacher perceptions of troublesome classroom behaviour.
- Found media reports to be sensationalist.
- Most misbehaviour innocuous – e.g., talking out of turn, hindering others, and idleness and slowness.
- Such behaviours were irritating, time wasting and over time, exhausting and stressful.
Other Australian Studies

Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp Study (2007)

- Confirmed earlier studies
  - Talking out of turn
  - Boys greater concern than girls
  - Low scale but over time, stressful
Steer Report (UK – 2009)

• ‘there is strong evidence from a range of sources that the overall standards of behaviour achieved by schools is good and has improved in recent years.’

20 years of studies of student behaviour:

- Schools are generally orderly and safe,
- Most behaviour minor but frequent, but contributes to teacher stress.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Limitations of Earlier Studies

Restricted definitions of problem behaviour

- Focussed on disruptive behaviours – ignored passive or withdrawn behaviours.
- Did not include indirect forms of anti-social behaviour (e.g., exclusion from the group & spreading rumours) more contemporary behaviours like cyber bullying.
Limitations of Earlier Studies

Psychologised issue of discipline in schools

- Focussed on individual student behaviour – the ‘misbehaving student’ or ‘naughty child’ perspective.
- Ignored context – e.g., planned and hidden curriculum; teachers’ pedagogic choices; relationships within the school; family dysfunction; socio-economic factors; gendered behaviour.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
More Ecological Approach

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Changes over past 20 years

- Inclusion of students with special needs
- Raising of school leaving age
- More diverse immigration – war, dislocation, trauma
- Complexity of family circumstances
- New technologies
- Increased social disengagement
- Increased drug use
- Increase in mental health issues in young people

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
## Terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labels</th>
<th>Misbehaviour Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>Mischievous behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to manage behaviour</td>
<td>Acting up behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misbehaviour</td>
<td>Acting-out behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poorly disciplined behaviour</td>
<td>Attention-seeking behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naughty behaviour</td>
<td>Defiant behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable behaviour</td>
<td>Inappropriate behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
“Trajectories of classroom behaviour and academic progress” (Angus et al, 2009)

• Focus on “Unproductive behaviours” - kinds of student classroom behaviours that impede a student’s academic progress.
Study Design

• Tracked cohorts of students over 4 years (total 1,300 students).

• Years 2, 4, 6 & 8 (Therefore included students in years 2-11).

• Teachers described the classroom behaviour of their students twice each year.

• These data were linked with students’ assessment results on academic performance measures.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
• Teachers rated students on 10 ‘unproductive behaviours’:

  – aggression - non-compliance
  – disruption - inattention
  – erratic behaviour - being impulsive
  – lack of motivation - being unresponsive
  – being unprepared - irregular attendance

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Four Categories of Student Behaviours

• Productive behaviours
  – Behaviours that support academic progress

• Disengaged behaviours
  – Lack of engagement with schoolwork but rarely aggressive, non-compliant or disruptive

• Uncooperative behaviours
  – Aggressive or noncompliant towards teachers or peers

• Low-level disruptive behaviours
  – Seeking attention, interrupting, provoking others, but not typically disengaged

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
In a year, what percentages do you think were reported? 
Guesses??

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
## Findings

### Unproductive Behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour Groups</th>
<th>% of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncooperative</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-level disruptive</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 40% of students remained productive over 4 consecutive years
- 20% were consistently unproductive
- 40% students fluctuated
- ‘Inattentiveness’ - most frequently reported unproductive behaviour
- Surprises?

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Findings: Academic Performance

• Uncooperative group (aggression, non-compliant, disruptive) performed worst.
  • receives greatest time and resources.
• Disengaged group (compliant, not aggressive) performed only marginally better.
  • Students in this 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.
• Students in the ‘unproductive group’ did not usually catch up academically;
• Most concerning were the ‘disengaged students’ – they have a similar trajectory in academic performance to ‘uncooperative students’ yet few resources are aimed at this group.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Behaviour at School Study

Identifying and addressing productive and unproductive student behaviours in South Australian schools
Phase 1: Behaviour

1. What is the nature and extent of unproductive behaviour in schools?

2. What strategies do teachers use to manage the range of unproductive behaviours they encounter?

Phase 2: School policy enactment (2013)

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
**Design:** Behaviour at School Study Teacher Survey (BaSS Teacher Survey).

Adapted from the Discipline in Schools Questionnaire (DiSQ) (Johnson et al., 1991).

Web-based questionnaire.

Adopted elements of Pipeline Project:
- Use of terms productive and unproductive behaviour,
- Emphasis on engagement.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Key aspects of BaSS Teacher Survey

• Types of unproductive student behaviours encountered;
  – Classroom
  – Other areas of school
• Frequency of these behaviours;
• Types of student behaviours most difficult to manage;
• Strategies used to manage unproductive student behaviours (in classroom and around school);
• Effectiveness of these strategies (in classroom and around school); and
• Characteristics of the most difficult to manage students.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
### Teacher Demographics

- **Respondents**: 1,380 teachers employed in South Australian schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Teacher Demographics

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
School Characteristics

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Section 3: UNPRODUCTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOUR IN CLASSES

- Listed below are some examples of unproductive student behaviours that teachers say they encounter in their classes.
- Referring back to your most recent teaching week, please indicate how frequently you had to manage each type of unproductive student behaviour.

Disengaging from classroom activities (e.g., opting out, daydreaming, withdrawing)

During the last week...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Several times daily</th>
<th>At least once a day</th>
<th>On most days</th>
<th>On one or two days</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Several times daily" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="At least once a day" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="On most days" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="On one or two days" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Not at all" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low-Level Disruptive Behaviours</th>
<th>Disengaged Behaviours</th>
<th>Aggressive/ Anti-social Behaviours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Disrupting the flow of a lesson</td>
<td>• Being Late for School</td>
<td>• Spreading rumours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talking out of turn</td>
<td>• Avoiding Doing School Work</td>
<td>• Excluding peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making distracting noises intentionally</td>
<td>• Disengaging from classroom activities</td>
<td>• Verbally abusing other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interfering with property</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verbally abusing teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Moving around the room unnecessarily</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sexually harassing other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using a mobile phone inappropriately</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sexually harassing teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using a laptop or iPad inappropriately</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Physically aggressive towards other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making impertinent remarks</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Physically aggressive towards teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mucking around, being rowdy</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Extremely violent to students and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan &amp; Johnson, 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Physically destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Displaying uncharacteristically erratic behaviours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Refer to table “Unproductive student behaviours reported by teachers” (p. 6)

What 2 key findings would you highlight for:
1. Your staff or colleagues?
2. Your local school community?
3. A media release?
4. Pre-service teachers?

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Findings

• The most common behaviours of concern were:
  – Disengaged behaviours,
  – Low-Level Disruptive behaviours.

• While Aggressive/Anti-social behaviours occur in schools, they are infrequently encountered by most teachers.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
• Teachers encountered low-level disruptive behaviours and disengaged behaviours on a daily basis.
Findings

- Teachers encountered low-level disruptive behaviours and disengaged behaviours on a daily basis.
- Over two thirds of teachers reported disengaged behaviours on at least an ‘almost daily’ basis.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Findings

- Teachers encountered low-level disruptive behaviours and disengaged behaviours on a daily basis.
- 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.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
### Most frequently reported Unproductive Classroom Behaviours

(‘several times a day’ category)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unproductive behaviours</th>
<th>% of all Teachers (n=1380)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking out of turn</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding doing schoolwork</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaging from classroom activities</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting the flow of a lesson</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving around the room unnecessarily</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being late for class</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making distracting noises intentionally</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mucking around, being rowdy</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
1. Primary teachers reported low-level disruptive behaviours and aggressive/anti-social behaviours significantly more often than middle/secondary teachers.
Key Messages

1. Primary teachers reported low-level disruptive behaviours and aggressive/anti-social behaviours significantly more often than middle/secondary teachers.

2. Early career teachers reported significantly higher instances of managing low-level disruptive behaviours than the majority of other categories of experience.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
1. Primary teachers reported low-level disruptive behaviours and aggressive/anti-social behaviours significantly more often than middle/secondary teachers.

2. Early career teachers reported significantly higher instances of managing low-level disruptive behaviours than the majority of other categories of experience.

3. Younger teachers (<29 years) reported the highest mean across low-level disruptive and disengaged categories of behaviours, therefore more frequently addressed these behaviours than all other age groups.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
4. 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; and
4. 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; and

5. Teachers of remote schools, who tend to be younger and have less experience, reported significantly more instances of disengaged behaviours and aggressive/anti-social behaviours than schools in other locations.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
## The Most Difficult Behaviours to Manage

### Unproductive behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unproductive behaviours</th>
<th>% of all teachers (n=1380)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding doing school work</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting the flow of a lesson</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaging from classroom activities</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking out of turn</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being late for class</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a mobile phone inappropriately</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being physically aggressive towards other students</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mucking around, being rowdy</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013

- **Disengaged**
- **Low-level disruptive**
BM Strategies
(used ‘often’ & ‘very often’)

% of teachers

- Time out: 15%
- Verbal reprimand: 30%
- Reason out of class: 40%
- Ignore: 41%
- Use 'Step' system: 42%
- Reason in class: 60%

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Causes of unproductive student behaviour

In your view, to what extent is student behaviour due to:

1. Individual factors – e.g., lack of self discipline,
2. School factors – e.g., inappropriate curriculum, or
3. Out-of-school factors – e.g., dysfunctional family?

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
### Individual Factors
- Lack of self discipline
- Impact of a diagnosed disability
- Poor academic skills
- Boredom
- Negative attitudes
- Violent disposition
- Lack of empathy
- Inability to concentrate
- Lack of perseverance
- Poor social skills
- Not able to work at the same level as the class

### School Factors
- Inappropriate curriculum
- Ineffective teaching methods
- Class sizes
- Lack of appropriate learning materials
- Lack of in-class disability support
- Ineffective school student management policies
- Alienating school culture
- Poor building & amenities
- Intolerant students who harass each other
- Low expectations of student performance
- Unrealistically high expectations of student performance
- Poor quality teachers
- Failure to adapt learning content for the student

### Out-of-School Factors
- Poverty
- Conflicting cultural, religious or racial factors
- Lack of parental guidance & management
- Lack of community resources
- Overcrowded housing
- Hostile & dangerous neighbourhood
- High family mobility
- Abuse & neglect of students at home
- Poorly educated parents
- Low parental expectations
- Few books or learning resources in the home
- Lack of access to computer & Internet resources at home
- Dysfunctional family structures

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Key Ideas

- Attribution of causality
- Individual and group agency
- Individual and group responsibility
In social psychology:

- **attributions** are inferences we make about the causes of behaviour and events.
- **agency** refers to a person’s or group’s perception of, or belief in, their ability to reach a goal, do something effectively, or achieve an outcome.

(related to self efficacy & empowerment)

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
## Weiner’s 3 dimensions

### 3 Dimensions of causal attributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Alternative perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locus of causality</td>
<td>Internal – cause of behaviour lies within a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External – cause of behaviour due to situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controllability</td>
<td>Internal – behaviour is within control of person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External – behaviour beyond control of individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Stable – behaviour is permanent &amp; unchanging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unstable – behaviour temporary or variable over time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
### Weiner’s 3 dimensions

#### Causal attributions links to agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher A: HIGH Agency</th>
<th>Teacher B: LOW Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cause of student unproductive behaviour is situational &amp; limited, i.e., related to classroom and curriculum matters.</td>
<td>Cause of student unproductive behaviour is internal and/or systemic, i.e., related to a personal problem or social deficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual has the capacity to change his or her behaviour</td>
<td>Due to a range of factors, the individual is unable to change his or her behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The behaviour is short lived, and amenable to change</td>
<td>The behaviour is well established and difficult to change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Attributions & Agency

- Beliefs:
  - Attributions
  - Shared explanations

- School Culture:
  - Assumptions
  - Routines
  - ‘The way we do things here’

- History:
  - Life histories
  - Professional histories

- Teacher talk:
  - Teacher interactions
  - Co-constructed myths

- Agency:
  - Decisions
  - Actions
  - Interventions
  - Strategies
  - Programs

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
### Teachers’ Attributions for Unproductive Student Behaviours

**Contribute most**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>% of teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of parental guidance &amp; management</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of self discipline</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attitudes</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perseverance</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional families</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to concentrate</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low parental expectations</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contribute least**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>% of teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor building &amp; amenities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrealistically high expectations of student performance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcrowding housing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienating school culture</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate curriculum</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor quality teachers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
• Comparison of the views of pre-service teachers and practicing teachers about the causes of student behaviour.

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Student Factors

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
School Factors

- Inappropriate curric
- Ineffective teaching methods
- Lack of materials
- Ineffective BMP
- Alienating school culture
- Poor quality teachers

3rd Years (n=115)
4th Years (n=144)
Teachers (n=1,448)

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Out of School Factors

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
1. What can school leaders do to interrupt and problematise teachers’ attributions about the causes of student behaviour?

2. Should we care?

Sullivan & Johnson, 2013
Group Reflection

• What are the 2 or 3 ‘take home messages’ you have encountered today?

• What are the implications of this research for your staff and colleagues?

• What feedback can you provide to the seminar organisers and facilitators?
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