

The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms

Senate Inquiry Submission from MultiLit Pty Ltd

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About MultiLit

MultiLit is a leading provider of effective literacy instruction and positive teaching and learning in Australasia. Our evidence-based work is grounded in extensive research and expertise in the science of learning, ensuring our programs deliver results with impact for the students and schools we work with.

Originating at Macquarie University, MultiLit has been providing effective literacy programs for over 25 years. We currently work with over 6,000 Australian schools, and train more than 8,500 teachers each year, as well as providing our Australian-developed programs and resources to schools all over the world. Our highly regarded professional development (PD) workshops provide the skills, knowledge and resources to support the effective implementation of all our programs.

All MultiLit literacy programs have a positive teaching foundation that ensures that teachers are using effective and supportive approaches to engage students in successful learning interactions. Engaged students learn more and have less time for any disruptive and disengaged behaviours to occur. This is rewarding for students and teachers alike and is an important factor in the success of MultiLit programs.

MultiLit's programs are evidence-based and extensively trialled in classroom settings. This, coupled with our in-depth understanding of curriculum and the contemporary classroom, ensure they are both user-friendly and practical for use. We conduct ongoing research into the effectiveness of all our programs and continually enhance and refine our offerings.

MultiLit's Positive Teaching and Learning Initiative is for schools seeking to improve learning environments with evidence-based strategies to improve student behaviour. Our professional development workshops cover the foundations and principles of positive teaching for effective classroom behaviour management, motivation and teaching for positive behaviour change, and workshops on the assessment and measurement of behaviour.

Whether support is needed for an individual school or a whole-system roll out, we can customise a strategy to suit. We have experience working successfully with leading bodies to introduce MultiLit programs in a diverse range of settings, across all states and systems in Australia.

MultiLit is proud to work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, educators and communities in urban and remote settings, in particular, through the Closing the Gap Schools Partnership Initiative, in collaboration with State and Commonwealth governments.

Summary

The problem of increasing student disruption in schools requires action to be taken at several levels, namely at the university level, the classroom level (meaning the teacher), and at the school level. Initial teacher education (ITE) needs to be improved so that teachers are well prepared for their roles. There is evidence that this is not the case. Without knowledge of evidence-based approaches to establishing positive and effective learning environments, teachers may not be employing the most effective methods of classroom

management. Reactive approaches may result from a lack of appropriate training which sets up negative cycles of interaction between teacher and student. Effective and proactive whole-class behaviour management reduces the incidence of low-level disruptive behaviour, thereby allowing teachers to teach and students to learn. This is not to say that all instances of misbehaviour will be eliminated but it will allow teachers to focus on those students who require more support to develop pro-social and learning behaviours. It is important that teachers gain an understanding of a function-based approach to behaviour management, knowledge that they are unlikely to have been exposed to in their initial training. While it is important for individual teachers to have a repertoire of effective classroom management skills, the most effective environments are those where there is a whole-school approach to creating a positive and supportive learning environment for all students. The Response to Intervention (RtI) framework provides for successively more intensive supports for students who may struggle to develop appropriate learning and social behaviour. Such an approach is predicated on high-quality universal practice, supplemented by more individualised approaches. Consistency across whole-school environments with knowledgeable teachers who are supported in ongoing professional development and practice holds a key to improving the current situation in schools.

Introduction

MultiLit welcomes the opportunity to submit a response on the Senate inquiry into ‘The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms’. MultiLit recognises this issue has become a growing concern in recent years, and has been actively responding via cutting-edge, evidence-based professional development courses for teachers. As reported in the Senate inquiry, “the results of increasing disruption to Australian school classrooms are disadvantaging students and contributing to poor literacy and numeracy results for young people, denying them the learning of essential foundational skills to reach their full educational, economic and social potential”.

The promotion of positive social behaviour and academic engagement is key to ensuring schools provide effective learning environments (Sugai & Horner, 2008). MultiLit is committed to equipping schools with the evidence base underlying the science of reading, effective instruction and positive behaviour change, as well as practical strategies and tools that are supported by this body of research (Wheldall, Wheldall, & Carter, 2023). Behaviour support practices that result from a functional behaviour assessment and employ a function-based approach are the most effective (Sugai & Horner, 2008).

MultiLit has considered the inquiry’s terms of reference and provides comment and recommendations in reference to the following terms:

- (b) the impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention;
- (c) teachers’ views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them;
- (d) the robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms;
- (e) the loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms;
- (f) the impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students’ learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms.

The impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention.

Poor classroom management and problematic student behaviour can have widespread negative impacts on schools. Problem behaviours become persistent barriers to learning and participation (Horner & Sugai, 2018), and this impacts the quality of life of the individual engaging in those behaviours as well as those attempting to support the individual with behaviours of concern. Disorderly classrooms can have severe impacts on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention. Teachers in disorderly classrooms may experience escalating behaviours of concern including verbal and physical aggression from students, significant disruptions to their lessons, student disengagement and declining academic outcomes leading to stress, anxiety and even physical injuries. Poor student behaviour and low student engagement and motivation overwhelms teachers and leads to less satisfaction in their role, resulting in many teachers choosing to leave the profession or seek alternative careers (Mooney et al., 2008). This turnover can create instability in schools, making it challenging to maintain a consistent educational environment for students.

It is repeatedly evident in the literature that problematic student behaviour within classrooms and schools relates heavily to issues such as teacher stress and burnout, job dissatisfaction, negative teacher perceptions, teacher attrition rates, hostile school environments and reduced student engagement (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Buchanan, 2011; Eick, 2012; Nobile et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2019). This problem has been documented for at least the past 20 years with attrition rates rising further following the COVID-19 pandemic (Longmuir et al., 2022). Teachers continue to report that managing classroom behaviour and student motivation are two of the most difficult aspects of their job and the components that may leave them feeling inadequately trained and unsupported in their roles (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2013).

MultiLit recommendations

1. The Response to Intervention (RtI) framework should inform the tiered design of behaviour support systems within schools and be reflected in required school policy and procedures. RtI is a model of instructional and behaviour support where students are provided with increasingly intensive levels of assistance. The RtI approach ensures that students who may demonstrate challenging behaviour are identified early, given appropriate support to suit their needs and monitored regularly. RtI categorises instructional needs and support into Tiers. Tier 1 provides all learners with the instructional opportunity to learn and demonstrate appropriate behaviour. Additional support strategies are provided for students in Tier 2 (up to 20% of all students), and a small number of students (up to 5% of Tier 2) will require intensive one-on-one behaviour support.
2. Policy settings should advance system-wide change, where teachers feel safe and supported within schools, through the adoption of a whole-school approach to behaviour management underpinned by ongoing training and the use of evidence-based resources and tools.
3. School leaders should adopt a whole-school approach to behaviour support where policies and procedures focus on preventative action to drive positive school culture and align practice with school values. Consistent approaches across classrooms ensures that there is predictability and fairness for students around behavioural expectations that are reinforced over time.
4. Teachers should be trained in function-based approaches to behaviour support, to understand why some students engage in challenging behaviour and learn how to intervene proactively. School-wide professional development and implementation training should be delivered to ensure consistency and adherence to school policies and initiatives.

Teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them.

The importance of functioning classrooms has been clearly articulated in research conducted by Monash University, "working conditions of teachers are the learning conditions of students" (Longmuir et al., 2022). Australian teachers have identified several challenges that impact their ability to effectively implement behaviour management strategies. Many of these challenges are systemic barriers that lead teachers to feeling disempowered and insufficiently prepared to effect change.

The identified barriers include:

- An absence of instruction on classroom behaviour management and positive behaviour support within initial teacher education (ITE) programs
- A lack of teacher professional development in evidence-based behaviour support practices
- Lack of tools and resources available to teachers that match the needs of their students
- An overloaded set of responsibilities, leading to teachers juggling many competing priorities
- Delayed access to specialists
- The complexity and diversity of behavioural, learning and social needs in the classroom without the support and resources to match those needs
- Escalating levels of significant challenging behaviour within the classroom
- School cultures that promote negative attitudes towards behaviours of concern, leaving teachers feeling isolated and solely responsible for the management of their classroom.

MultiLit recommendations

5. School leaders should adopt a whole-school approach to behaviour support where policies and procedures focus on preventative action to drive positive school culture and align practice with school values.
6. When a whole-school approach is adopted, school leaders should ensure that appropriate supports are in place at every level of the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework. This begins with ensuring the core universal strategies are firmly and consistently in place in every classroom. It also enables early screening and detection of students who may require closer monitoring, or more targeted interventions, which can then be successfully executed.
7. Resources must be invested in ongoing, comprehensive professional development programs for teachers to provide them with the necessary education, skills and strategies to manage student behaviour effectively. Resources should be invested in both making professional development courses more available and creating greater opportunities for teachers to engage in these courses meaningfully.
8. Training must go beyond simply learning about behaviour, and professional development should include explicit implementation practices.

The robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms.

An adequately skilled and robust workforce is an essential condition for the positive and effective management of all student behaviour to optimise the educational experience, wellbeing and outcomes for all students. The improved capacity of teachers will lead to enhanced teacher wellbeing and retention in the profession. We know that many teachers leave the profession, and leave it early, in response to difficulties

with managing student behaviour. Initial teacher preparation in this area is usually inadequate and teachers transitioning into the profession often have to 'make it up as they go along' (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2013).

It appears that teacher preservice training programs lack explicit instruction and dedicated courses on classroom behaviour management practices. Teachers often begin their teaching career with limited understanding of the science of behaviour and learning and how this relates to the practicalities of the classroom (Merrett & Wheldall, 1993; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2013). Furthermore, a survey of first-year teachers reported that they felt only partially prepared to manage trivial misbehaviour such as disruptions and noncompliance, and inadequately trained to manage aggressive, antisocial or destructive behaviours (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2013).

Therefore, the majority of teachers entering the field rely heavily on information and strategies being passed down from one teacher to the other. The risk of this approach is that early entry teachers may receive advice and strategies that not only lack evidence on effectiveness, but are potentially reactive and damaging. Missing out on critical training in evidence-based, positive and proactive classroom behaviour management can become a downward spiral, where poor teacher responses disrupt the class and lead to more students disengaging (Goss & Sonnemann, 2017).

Training tends to focus on how to assess academic difficulties, but fails to provide training on how to systematically assess and support challenging behaviour (Young et al., 2018). Lack of training in a function-based approach to behaviour management (the 'why' a student may be engaging in certain behaviours) often leads teachers down a slippery path toward the overuse of reactive and aversive strategies. In addition, without understanding or identifying the function of the problem behaviour, teachers are more likely to inadvertently reinforce and strengthen problem behaviour.

MultiLit recommendations

9. Training should begin at the tertiary level and extend to ongoing professional development once teachers enter the field and be prioritised for early career teachers.
10. The period of early service for teachers should include access to a suitably experienced teacher (a mentor) who can model effective and evidence-based classroom behaviour strategies.
11. Professional development should focus on upskilling the teaching workforce with the science of behaviour and positive behaviour support and specifically, function-based approaches to behaviour change.
12. Policy settings should enable schools to develop internal expertise in evidence-based and effective behaviour support practices from behaviour assessment, intervention and monitoring so schools reduce dependency on external support and expertise.

The loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms.

Teachers may spend a considerable amount of time managing the behaviour of a few, rather than teaching and managing the classroom as a whole. This can lead to less time spent on actual teaching and learning activities. This loss of instructional time can have negative consequences for student achievement, as students may miss out on valuable instruction as the classroom becomes increasingly disrupted.

Schools should prioritise creating a safe and structured learning environment for students. The achievement of this objective is more likely when an effective whole-school Tier 1 (i.e. universal) strategy is firmly in place, such as the Positive Teaching approach (Wheldall et al., 2020; Wheldall et al., 2023). Classroom environments need to be ready and responsive to encourage, support and 'catch' and acknowledge students engaging in desired classroom behaviours. Focussing on pro-social behaviour in the classroom provides all students with

immediate examples of desired behaviours for learning and engagement. It flips the focus from what students should *not* be doing to what they should be doing. Furthermore, schools must focus on explicitly teaching these skills and behaviours to their students. As the recently released report *Effective behaviour supports in schools* (Evidence for Learning, 2023) suggests, teaching 'learning behaviours' should always be occurring simultaneously to managing challenging behaviour as part of a school-wide approach.

MultiLit recommendations

13. Schools should implement a Response to Intervention framework focusing heavily on the effective implementation of Tier 1 (i.e. universal) supports in order to increase the capacity of teachers to support students at Tier 2 and 3. Effective Tier 1 practices will reduce the number of students requiring Tier 2 and 3 support.
14. Teachers require training in explicit instruction in Tier 1 strategies including (but not limited to) the Positive Teaching approach, function-based approaches, effective instruction and proactive classroom support.
15. School-wide approaches should also focus on teaching all students contextually appropriate behaviours that support engagement, participation and learning as an integral component of their behaviour support policies and practices.

Conclusion

When a whole school adopts a consistent and effective methodology to support the diverse learning and behavioural needs of all students, everyone benefits. Proactive and positive approaches guide teachers to look for opportunities to model, teach and reinforce desired behaviours and steer them away from reacting to problems. This results in more successful and engaged learners, and teachers who can get back to the business of teaching.

The lack of training in behaviour management practices at a tertiary level puts significant pressure on teachers within schools and leads to job dissatisfaction and high attrition rates. Teachers are expected to manage not only the academic performance but also the social and emotional wellbeing of their students. The current available research provides clear evidence for the need for comprehensive training in positive behaviour support for teachers and support staff within all schools, so that teachers spend less time reacting to problems and students spend more time engaged in learning. Assisting schools to move from a reactive approach to a systematic, proactive approach leads to calmer, happier and more positive teachers and students. To achieve this, teachers require the time, resources and support to engage meaningfully in comprehensive professional development involving implementation practice and feedback.

MultiLit strongly recommends that any revised policy settings and funding opportunities that result from this inquiry should be directed to advance strategies that are grounded in the extensive available research in the science of learning and behaviour.

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