# Classroom Behaviour in Practice: Prevention & Response

# Training handout


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## Part 1: Theoretical Foundations

### 1. Behaviour Management as Professional Decision-Making

Managing a classroom requires split-second professional judgment under pressure, moving far beyond mere control or punishment. Effective teachers continuously interpret situations, weigh risks, and choose responses that protect learning, safety, and dignity.

When behaviour is framed as a student problem (e.g. “difficult”, “disrespectful”, “lazy”), teachers are left with limited options: punish, remove, or confront. This framing often leads to emotional, public, or delayed reactions.

**A situational framing asks a different question:**

*What in this moment is producing this behaviour?*

This shift does not excuse behaviour. Instead, it gives teachers leverage by focusing on what can be changed immediately: language, timing, structure, audience, and task design.

### 2. Why Behaviour Escalates

**Escalation rarely begins with a major incident. It develops through predictable stages:**

- **Micro-signals:** whispers, avoidance, movement, disengagement
- **Low-level disruption:** comments, jokes, refusal to participate
- **Disruptive incident:** emotional or confrontational behaviour
- **Public confrontation:** loss of focus, audience involvement
- **Teacher error:** intervention that is emotional, public, or late

Escalation often occurs because teachers intervene too late: only once behaviour has become public.

**3. Prevention as a Professional Responsibility**

**Prevention is not optional; it is part of lesson planning.**

**High-risk moments include:**

- A public correction
- Transitions without clear structure
- Task confusion or overload
- Peer presence / seeking an audience
- Uncertainty / low self-esteem

**Preventive moves include:**

- Strategic teacher positioning
- Pausing instead of repeating instructions
- Managing transitions tightly
- Proper Preparation

**4. Using Proxemics as a Behavioural Tool**

"Proxemics", the use of physical space, plays a significant role in classroom management.

Four key spatial zones:

- **Intimate Zone** (0–45 cm)
- **Personal Zone** (45 cm–1.2 m)
- **Social Zone** (1.2–3.7 m)
- **Public Zone** (beyond 3.7 m)

In classroom practice, teachers primarily operate between the **social** and **personal zones**.

A key technique is **proximity interference**:

- The teacher moves into a **student's personal zone**
- This creates a **non-verbal signal of monitoring and authority**
- The behaviour **often stops without verbal interruption**

Advantages:

- Avoids **public confrontation**
- Allows the student to **save face**
- Maintains **lesson flow**

Limit:
The **intimate zone should be avoided**, as it may be perceived as intrusive or threatening and can escalate behaviour.

### 5. Responding to Escalating Students

When a student is already escalating, strategies must shift from prevention to de-escalation.

Effective techniques include:

- **Increasing physical distance**
  (avoiding feelings of being cornered; approx. 1.5–2 meters)
- **Using "low and slow" communication**
  (quiet, steady, controlled tone)
- **Maintaining non-confrontational body language**
  (open posture, no pointing, no looming over the student)
- **Offering limited choices**
  (e.g. "You can continue here or move to another seat")
- **Providing take-up time**
  (giving instructions, then stepping away)

A critical boundary:
**Physical contact must always be avoided**, as it can be misinterpreted and lead to further escalation.

### 6. Teacher Language and Escalation

Certain phrases escalate situations because they challenge identity, invite power struggles, or create an audience.

**Escalating language includes:**

- "How many times do I have to tell you?"
- "You're being rude/disrespectful."
- "If you don't stop, you'll…"

**Professional alternatives:**

- "We'll deal with this after the activity."
- "Right now, the task is…"
- "You can choose exercise A or B."

Professional language maintains authority, buys time, and protects lesson flow.

## Is Delinquency contagious in a classroom setting?

The answer is ‘yes’, delinquency ***is*** contagious in a classroom setting. Sociologists and psychologists refer to this phenomenon as "**peer contagion**" or "**social contagion**". Extensive longitudinal research shows that exposure to disruptive or delinquent classmates directly increases the likelihood that other students will adopt similar behaviours.

For example, a study published in the Journal of Quantitative Criminology found that increasing the proportion of delinquent peers in a classroom by just 5% correlates with a 3-percentage point increase in an individual student’s likelihood of engaging in criminal or delinquent acts.

## Why Delinquency Spreads in Class

The "contagion" of delinquency is driven by measurable psychological, sociological, and neurological mechanisms.

**A. Deviancy Training:** Coined by psychologists, **deviancy training** occurs when peers positively reinforce antisocial behaviour through laughter, attention, or verbal encouragement. In a classroom, a student who disrupts a lesson or mocks a teacher often receives instant social validation from peers, which signals to other students that deviance is a pathway to social status.

**B. Establishing Descriptive Norms:** When multiple students in a classroom exhibit disruptive behaviour, it alters the perceived **"descriptive norm"** of the room. Antisocial behaviour begins to feel "normal" or acceptable. In these environments, students who behave prosocially may actually feel like they are the ones deviating from the group standard.

**C. Status Frustration and Subcultures:** Sociological theories (such as Albert Cohen's *Subcultural Theory*) highlight that students who struggle academically often experience **status frustration**. Unable to gain respect through high grades or conventional school achievements, they band together with other struggling students. They form a localized subculture that flips traditional school values upside down, thus, earning respect and prestige by breaking rules rather than following them.

**D. Testing Unchallenged Boundaries:** According to *Social Learning Theory*, students learn by watching the outcomes of others' actions. If a student repeatedly observes classmates engaging in low-level delinquency (like truancy, talking back, or cheating) without facing swift consequences, the perceived threat of punishment drops. This emboldens other students to test the boundaries themselves

| Why the Student Misbehaves | What the Teacher Can Do |
|---|---|
| **To feel important and get noticed by friends** ***(Seeking Peer Status - Strategy A)*** | **Stand Near Them:** Walk over and teach from right next to their desk to quiet them down without making a scene. |
| **To feel important and get noticed by friends** ***(Seeking Peer Status - Strategy B)*** | **Rotate Tasks Alphabetically:** Automatically rotate daily class jobs so everyone gets a visible turn to lead without needing to misbehave for it. |
| **To test the teacher's limits** | **Give Choice Within Boundaries:** Offer simple, pre-approved choices for *how* to complete work (e.g., "Write or type the answer?"). This fulfils their need for control while keeping them inside the rules. |
| **To fit in because they are lonely or scared** | **Smart Seating:** Arrange desks in permanent small clusters so quiet, lonely, or scared kids are naturally included and not influenced negatively by others. |

## The Secretary as an extension of the Teacher

Secretaries play a pivotal role when alleviating tensions and managing the flow of the schedule. Classroom Management is associated with the following:

- Warm welcome to all students, even to those who are late.
- Avoiding Interrogation, but showing concern.
- Keeping track of attendance and notifying promptly
- Shouldn’t judge when a student is sent out (make it a safe space without siding with them).

### 7. Rage-Baiting and Emotional Control

Rage-baiting is deliberate behaviour designed to provoke an emotional reaction from the teacher. It feeds on audience attention and teacher emotion.

*Key principle:*

Rage-baiting ends the moment the teacher stops feeding it.

**How do we respond?**

Professional responses involve neutrality, brevity, removal of audience, and delayed follow-up.

### 8. Teacher Self-Regulation

Calm is not passive: it is strategic.

- Emotion is contagious
- Authority does not require winning
- Professionalism requires consistency, not dominance

### When Parents Challenge Classroom Decisions

- Avoid replying emotionally during or immediately after conflict
- Do not try to “prove” you are right in the moment
- Keep records of repeated behaviours and incidents
- Avoid taking accusations personally, even when they feel unfair
- Know when a conversation should involve management support

### Healthy Professional Practices: (personal well-being)

- Accept that some lessons will feel emotionally exhausting
- Stop expecting yourself to respond perfectly every time
- Take short mental resets after difficult classes when possible
- Avoid replaying incidents repeatedly after work
- Share difficult experiences with trusted colleagues? (debatable)
- Recognise when behaviour is affecting your wellbeing
- Understand that constant emotional control is mentally draining

**CONTEMPLATION:**

**“Why do experienced teachers sometimes struggle more emotionally than new teachers?”**

Experienced teachers often:

- carry accumulated fatigue
- personalise challenges more deeply
- feel pressure to maintain authority
- receive less emotional support because they are seen as “experienced”

**What happens when every teacher handles behaviour differently?”**

Possible repercussions:

- student manipulation of inconsistency
- unclear boundaries
- emotional unpredictability
- teacher resentment

Please introduce:

- common language policies
- de-escalation scripts
- unified expectations

**FURTHER CONTEMPLATION (Share & Discuss):**

“What behaviours have become more common post-pandemic?”

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“What parent conversations are hardest for schools?”

_____

“How should schools respond when parents (or students) increasingly document conversations, incidents, and teacher interactions through technology?”

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## Part 2: Case Studies and Professional Approaches

### Case Study 1: Persistent Low-Level Disruption

| Element | Description |
|---|---|
| **Context** | Teen EFL class (ages 14–16). One student repeatedly makes humorous side comments in L1 during low-structure moments. |
| **Teacher notices** | Peer-checking before speaking, laughter reinforcing behaviour. |
| **Risk** | Disruption normalised; authority slowly erodes. |
| **Common response** | Public reprimand, sarcasm. |
| **Professional response** | Silent proximity, brief task redirection, no public naming. |
| **Reflective question** | At what moment could the teacher have intervened earlier to prevent this becoming public? |
| **Possible professional answers** | Intervene during micro-signals; remove audience early; prioritise lesson flow over correction. |

### Case Study 2: Refusal to Participate

| Element | Description |
|---|---|
| **Context** | Secondary class (ages 15–17). Student keeps books closed, avoids eye contact, remains silent. |
| **Teacher notices** | Passive resistance begins after public instructions. |
| **Risk** | Public power struggle; disengagement becomes identity-based. |
| **Common response** | Public demand for compliance. |
| **Professional response** | Quiet, private choice-based instruction. |
| **Reflective question** | How does public instruction change the meaning of compliance for this student? |
| **Possible professional answers** | Public demands threaten dignity; private choices allow compliance without loss of face. |

### Case Study 3: Emotional Reaction

| Element | Description |
|---|---|
| **Context** | Mixed-ability class. Teacher corrects a student publicly; student reacts emotionally. |
| **Teacher notices** | Sudden emotional shift; class attention locks onto exchange. |
| **Risk** | Emotional contagion; confrontation. |
| **Common response** | Insisting on public correction or ignoring entirely. |
| **Professional response** | Lower voice, minimal language, delayed conversation. |
| **Reflective question** | Is my priority to correct behaviour immediately or prevent escalation? |
| **Possible professional answers** | Prevent escalation when emotions rise; delay correction; base decisions on observable cues. |

**Case Study 4: Perceived Unfairness After Reprimand**

| Element | Description |
|---|---|
| **Context** | Upper secondary class (ages 16–17). Student claims they are always reprimanded. |
| **Teacher notices** | Intention emotions; peer attention shifts. |
| **Risk** | Public debate about fairness; authority reframed as bias. |
| **Common response** | Defending oneself publicly; comparisons. |
| **Professional response** | Acknowledge feelings; postpone discussion. |
| **Reflective question** | How can feelings be acknowledged without turning this into a public trial? |
| **Possible professional answers** | Validate emotion without agreeing; restate expectations; move discussion to private space. |

**Case Study 5: Passive Defiance and Phone Usage**

| Element | Description |
|---|---|
| **Context** | Upper secondary EFL class. One student uses phone discreetly. Other students start to disengage. |
| **Teacher notices** | Withdrawal, whispering, avoidance. |
| **Risk** | Silent spread of disengagement. |
| **Common response** | Public reprimand; sarcasm. |
| **Professional response** | **One intervention at a time.** 1. Quietly ask student to put phone away. 2. Walk away and continue teaching. 3. Two minutes later approach student again and silently ask them to join activity. |
| **Reflective question** | Is this behaviour seeking power, attention, or escape? |

### Case Study 6: Bullying in the Classroom

| Element | Description |
|---|---|
| **Context** | One student verbally intimidates another during a lesson. |
| **Teacher notices** | Distress, silence, power imbalance. |
| **Risk** | Normalisation of harm; loss of safety. |
| **Avoid** | False notion it might stop. |
| **Immediate priority** | Stop behaviour; protect dignity; restore safety. |
| **Reflective question** | What action must I take immediately, even if it disrupts the lesson? |
| **Possible professional answers** | Stop behaviour publicly; separate students; document and follow protocol. |

### Final Note

Behaviour management is not about having the perfect response; rather, it involves making professional decisions that prevent escalation, protect learners, and preserve learning.

## 9. Resources for Classroom Management 📎


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