



## Chapter 6

# Classroom management

### Key points

- Effective classroom management is important for creating a positive classroom environment that minimises disruptions, maximises instruction time, supports teacher and student relationships and safety, and encourages students to engage in learning.
- Research shows links between effective classroom management and student engagement and achievement.
- Classroom management involves both proactive and responsive strategies, which are informed by the teacher's knowledge of their students' physical, social and intellectual development strengths and needs and characteristics (including cultural background).
- Classroom behaviours that support effective learning, academic achievement, and positive relationships can and should be explicitly taught, modelled and reinforced over time.
- A whole-school approach can strengthen the positive impacts of effective classroom management.
- Any teacher may experience classroom management challenges, but early-career teachers may especially benefit from professional learning in classroom management.

## What is classroom management?

Classroom management is a broad term that encompasses a range of practices to create a safe, positive and stimulating environment to support students' academic and socio-emotional learning (Evertson and Weinstein 2006; CESE 2020a).

Effective classroom management extends beyond behaviour management. It involves creating a positive classroom climate through proactive strategies that reinforce appropriate student behaviours, such as establishing positive teacher–student relationships, explicitly teaching and modelling expected classroom rules and routines, holding high expectations for students, engaging students with high-quality instruction and creating safe and predictable environments through classroom organisation (Richardson et al. 2023; CESE 2024d).<sup>1</sup> Classroom management also encompasses effective responses to disruptive and disengaged behaviours, such as verbal and non-verbal corrections (Richardson et al. 2023; CESE 2024d).

Effective classroom management also considers the diverse cultures represented in NSW classrooms (NSW Department of Education 2024c). Culturally responsive classroom management involves teachers developing both their understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds and their understanding of broader power, social, economic and political factors (Weinstein et al. 2004). Recognising and valuing diverse perspectives and experiences of students can help teachers build positive relationships with their students and create culturally inclusive and responsive classroom rules, routines and expectations (AERO 2023a; AERO 2024a).

## What the evidence says

### Why classroom management matters

Effective classroom management is vital for creating an environment that minimises disruptions, maximises instruction time and encourages students to engage in learning (CESE 2024d). Meta-analyses of effective classroom management have found moderate positive effects on student behaviour (Oliver et al. 2011), as well as student engagement and achievement (Marzano et al. 2003).

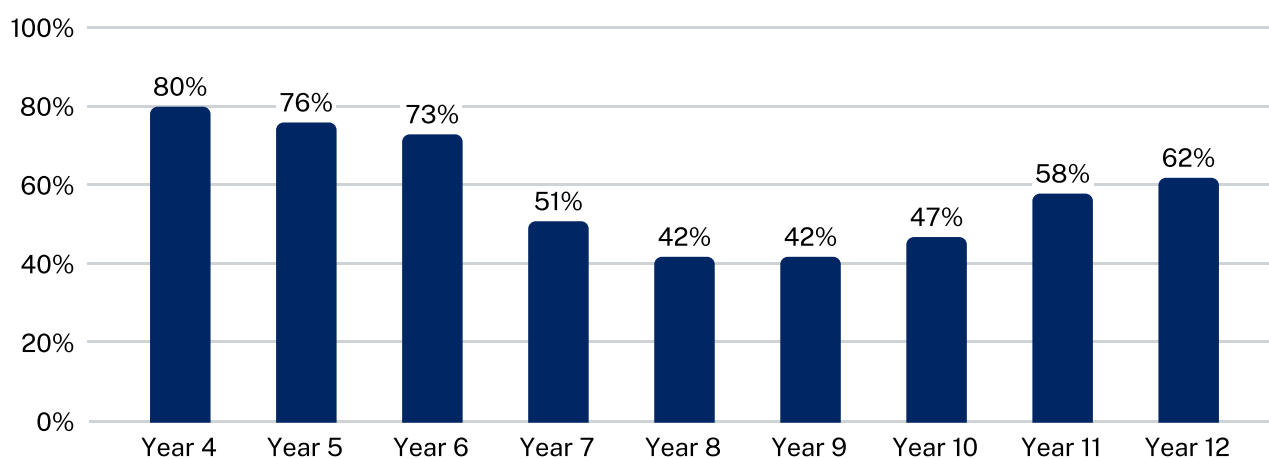
A meta-analysis of classroom management research conducted in primary schools replicated the findings of a positive effect on student achievement and student behaviour, and additionally found a positive effect on student social-emotional outcomes (Korpershoek et al. 2016). Effective classroom management also supports a positive sense of belonging and is a predictor of students' everyday resilience and levels of academic agency (Bostwick et al. 2022; CESE 2020b, 2022b, 2024d).<sup>2</sup> In addition, effective classroom management helps to establish a positive attendance culture (CESE 2022d).

1 Classroom organisation refers to the way a classroom is physically set up as well as the establishment of classroom routines. For more information, refer to the NSW Department of Education's (2022) [Positive behaviour support: classroom organisation \[PDF 373KB\]](#) resource.

2 In the literature, 'everyday resilience' is called 'academic buoyancy' (Martin and Marsh 2008). It emphasises proactive and adaptive approaches to overcoming academic adversity. 'Academic agency' refers to a student's ability to take an active role in their own learning, and their capacity to make choices, set goals and take actions that contribute to their academic success.

Classroom management and the classroom climate are of particular concern in Australian secondary schools.<sup>3</sup> This is illustrated by PISA 2022 data, which reported a 10% increase from 2012 in the number of 15-year-old students reporting that they could not work well in some or every maths lesson because of the disciplinary climate (OECD 2023; Senate Education and Employment References Committee 2024). In the NSW context, student survey data reveals that students’ perceptions of well-managed classroom climates are lowest during the middle years of secondary school (Figure 6.1). In line with other indicators of student engagement, classroom climate improves in senior secondary school for NSW students. It is unclear if this pattern reflects differences in how teachers use classroom management practices with different cohorts, differences in student behaviours, differences in student perceptions of classroom management practices, or a combination of these factors. Irrespective of the underlying causes of this pattern, the data suggests that there is an opportunity to improve how secondary students feel about classroom climate.

**Figure 6.1**  
 Percentage of students reporting a positive classroom climate, by year level, NSW public schools, 2024



Source: CESE analysis of Tell Them From Me data, collected from 153,159 primary students and 176,831 secondary students across 1,650 NSW public schools in 2024.

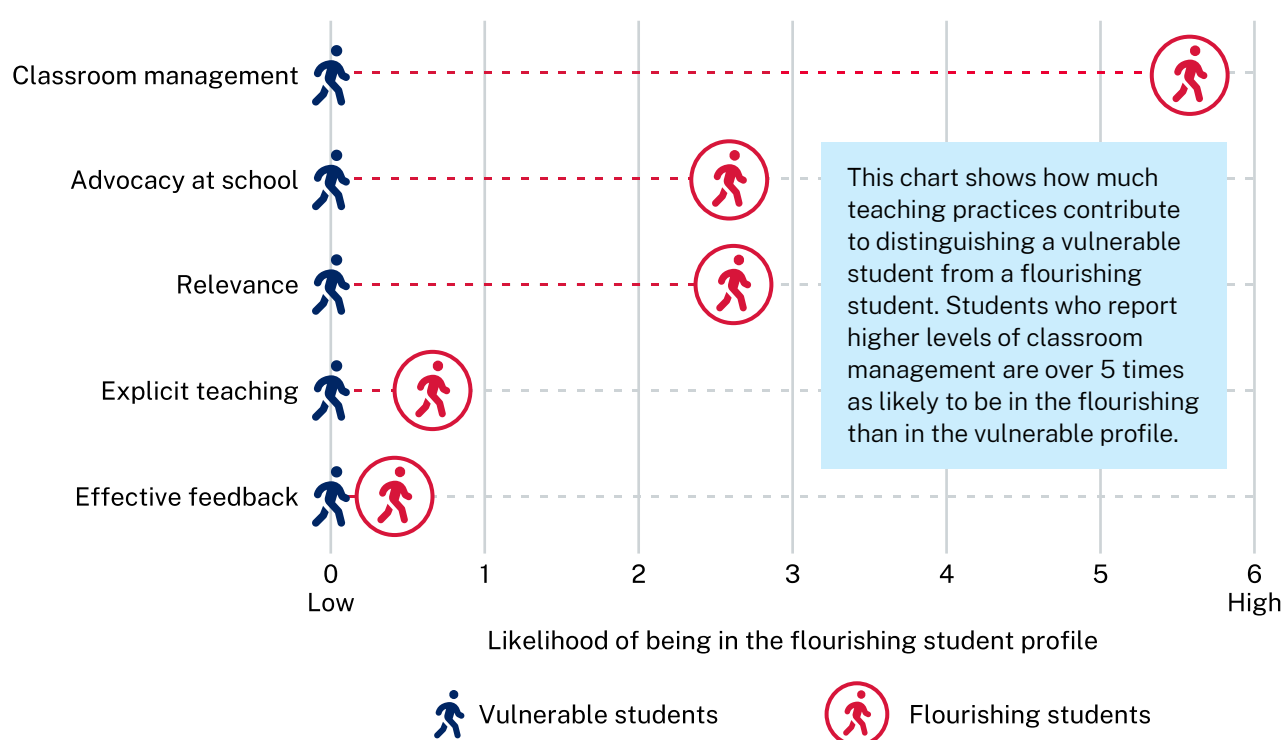
## Effective classroom management can help lift student performance and academic agency

Research suggests that effective classroom management is positively associated with students’ academic achievement. For example, Thomson et al. (2020) analysed Australian students’ PISA reading literacy performance and found that high performers reported more well-managed classroom climates than middle performers, who likewise reported more well-managed classroom climates than low performers. Similarly, De Bortoli et al. (2024) found that PISA mathematics performance was substantially higher across all Australian jurisdictions where students reported well-managed maths classroom climates. In NSW, students who reported well-managed maths classroom climates performed 69 points higher than those who reported the lowest levels of classroom climates (De Bortoli et al. 2024).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Classroom climate’ refers to students’ opinions of their educational experience. This can include their perceptions on the rigour of their class, their interactions with their teacher and peers, and their engagement in classroom tasks.

Effective classroom management is an important basis for other effective teaching practices as it establishes a well-structured and non-disruptive learning environment (AERO 2023a; CESE 2024d). Recent CESE research indicates that classroom management is a key practice that can support low-SES students who are struggling to develop their academic agency (Collie et al. 2023; CESE 2024d). This research identified student characteristics that could be organised as profiles of academic agency: ‘flourishing’ students who reported more positive levels of all measured aspects of academic agency than the average student across all SES backgrounds and ‘vulnerable’ students who had considerably lower levels in all aspects of academic agency than the average student. The CESE research examined whether teaching practices, including classroom management, made a difference to students’ profile membership, above and beyond their demographic background and prior achievement. Results showed that higher levels of classroom management were particularly influential in distinguishing flourishing students from vulnerable students (as illustrated by the positions of the circled students in Figure 6.2). For more information on how classroom management and other What Works Best practices can support low-SES students, refer to CESE’s (2024d) [Supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to flourish – What Works Best in practice](#).

**Figure 6.2**  
**Impact of teaching practices expressed as likelihood of being in the flourishing student profile, controlling for demographic background and prior achievement**



Note: Likelihood derived from odds ratios; all odds ratios are statistically significant.

Source: UNSW-CESE analysis based on Tell Them From Me survey responses of low-SES secondary students in Semester 1, 2019 and 2021.

## Effective classroom management creates positive learning environments by encouraging appropriate behaviours and responding to disengaged behaviours

Proactive and preventative strategies play an important role in creating positive learning environments by teaching and reinforcing appropriate student behaviours. These strategies increase the amount of time for instruction while reducing the amount of time spent responding to inappropriate behaviours, and include (CESE 2020a; Peddie et al. 2024):

- establishing positive teacher–student relationships
- creating safe and predictable classroom climates, including using culturally responsive teaching practices
- holding high expectations for students
- engaging students with high-quality instruction
- explicitly teaching and modelling classroom rules and routines
- reinforcing expected behaviours through praise and rewards
- having clear and consistent responses for inappropriate behaviour.

When using praise and rewards, Wheldall et al. (2020) emphasise that it should be contingent and provided immediately after the expected behaviour is demonstrated. Additionally, such positive reinforcements should fade out once the expected behaviours are reliably demonstrated (Wheldall et al. 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Research also acknowledges that responsive strategies are required to prevent disengaged and disruptive behaviours from escalating. When de-escalating student behaviour, it is important to remain calm and ensure that the response is proportionate to the level of behaviour displayed (CESE 2020a; Richardson et al. 2023; Peddie et al. 2024). For example, when addressing low-level behaviours, teachers may try non-verbal responses (for example, increasing proximity to the student, and/or using body language, gestural cues or facial expressions), followed by verbal responses (for example, private corrections and/or whole-class reminder of expectations) and providing students with a choice (for example, working on the task individually or rejoining the group) (AERO 2023a). Responses should allow time for students to correct their behaviour and include positive acknowledgement when they do so (AERO 2023a).

Teachers’ understanding of their students and how they learn is key to encouraging positive behaviours. This includes teachers using knowledge of students to inform their development of classroom rules, routines and expectations that are culturally responsive and inclusive to students’ physical, social and intellectual development strengths and needs. This also includes understanding student preferences – for example, whether they prefer receiving praise publicly or in private (Meyer et al. 2021). Knowing students and how they learn can also support teachers to establish and maintain positive relationships with students, including by reflecting on their own behaviour, emotions, and thoughts when interacting with their students.

4 For more information on positive reinforcement, refer to CESE’s (2020a) [Classroom management: creating and maintaining positive learning environments](#).

Teachers' understanding of their students' physical, social and intellectual development, strengths, needs and characteristics is also critical for them to provide proportionate and effective responses to inappropriate behaviour. Students can have different underlying reasons for disengaged or disruptive behaviour, and for responses to be effective they need to consider the reason for the behaviour (Epstein et al. 2008; Evidence for Learning 2023). Some students may demonstrate challenging behaviours in the classroom due to disability and/or additional learning and support needs (Epstein et al. 2008). These students may benefit from teachers following the principles of proactive and responsive strategies outlined above, while adjusting those strategies and supports based on students' strengths, needs and preferences (Kern and Clemens 2007; Osher et al. 2010; Leach and Helf 2016; Skiba et al. 2016; AERO 2025a).

### Resources to support effective classroom management practices

- For more information on effective classroom management practices, refer to CESE's (2020a) [Classroom management: creating and maintaining positive learning environments](#) and AERO's (2023a) [Effectively managing classrooms to create safe and supportive learning environments](#).
- For evidence-based practice resources for schools to support students with disability and additional needs, refer to the NSW Department of Education's [Inclusive Practice hub](#).
- For advice on creating a safe and inclusive learning environment for students with diverse needs, refer to the suite of resources published by AERO (2025a) [Planning: supporting students' diverse needs practice guide](#).



## Explicit teaching of behaviours is beneficial for students

Students do not always arrive at school, or progress through year levels, already equipped with the behaviours that support effective learning, academic achievement and positive relationships. These behaviours need to be explicitly taught, modelled and reinforced over time. Students need to learn to pay attention when their teacher or their peers are speaking, to not interrupt others, to follow instructions and to be respectful of other's views, person and property. Among other things, they need to learn to bring all necessary equipment to lessons, to accept and apply feedback constructively and manage both their learning and social interactions.

Behaviours that are appropriate to specific environments, such as classrooms and school-related activities, are learned in those settings. Like other sorts of knowledge and skills that are learned, behaviours can be taught, and explicit teaching strategies for behaviour are highly effective (Alter and Haydon 2017; McDonald 2023). Explicit teaching of behaviour involves planning the behaviours to be learned, allocating time to teach them, explaining and modelling, providing consistent and contingent feedback and making necessary adjustments based on the responses of students. Having a statement of norms and routines connected to their values and aims – that all staff and students know, understand and commit to – can embed these practices across a whole school (Bennett 2023).

Establishing norms and routines for classroom behaviour is not just about setting arbitrary rules. Norms are underpinned by shared values and attitudes that allow classrooms to be safe, inclusive and culturally responsive environments that enable learning and help students feel the sense of belonging that makes them want to attend school and engage meaningfully. Routines are the habits that make it easier for students and teachers to abide by the agreed behaviour norms (Bennett 2020; Peddie et al. 2024).

Establishing and maintaining high behavioural expectations – delivered with both certainty and empathy – is fundamental to fostering an equitable and inclusive classroom culture. When teachers clearly articulate, explicitly teach and consistently reinforce productive behaviours, students are more likely to understand and meet these expectations, promoting a positive learning environment for all (Peddie et al. 2024).

## Effective classroom management can maximise the time available for teaching and minimise behaviours that adversely affect learning

Many teachers report that managing student behaviour takes up a significant share of their time that would otherwise be spent teaching. For example, in a 2021 survey of Australian teachers, 68% indicated that more than 10% of their day was spent managing the behavioural issues of individual students (NeiTA and ACE 2021). Effective classroom management can help minimise disruptive behaviours from interfering with learning in the classroom (Franklin and Harrington 2021).

It is important that classroom management practices also minimise and address low-level disengagement in lessons, even if students are not disrupting others in the classroom. Students who are disengaged, but not disruptive, may perform equally poorly on academic outcomes as students who are disruptive (Angus et al. 2009). Low-level disengagement behaviours (for example, avoiding schoolwork) are common, with teachers most frequently reporting it as a concern alongside low-level disruptive behaviours (for example, talking out of turn) (Beaman et al. 2007; Sullivan et al. 2014). Teachers also report that these low-level disengagement and low-level disruptive behaviours are stressful and hard to manage (Sullivan et al. 2014).

## A whole-school approach is beneficial for effective classroom management

The positive impact of effective classroom management processes and strategies can be strengthened through a whole-school approach (Goss et al. 2017; CESE 2020a; Richardson et al. 2023). By developing shared understandings and expectations around appropriate behaviours, rules and routines, the predictability offered by a whole-school approach reduces the need for students to adapt their behaviour across different classrooms.

School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) is an evidence-based framework widely adopted across Australia to uplift students' social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes (Whitefield et al. 2022). SWPBS is commonly referred to as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) in NSW (refer to the NSW Department of Education's [Behaviour and engagement](#) webpages for more information and resources about PBL and other school-wide behaviour approaches). Under SWPBS, schools select and implement a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to meet the needs of all students (Fox et al. 2021; Whitefield et al. 2022). Universal supports for all students are provided at the first tier, with targeted small group supports and intensive individualised supports provided at the second and third tiers respectively (Whitefield et al. 2022). The tiered supports are cumulative – that is, more specialised supports are added to supplement, rather than replace, existing supports at the lower levels (Sugai et al. 2014). As such, SWPBS can be an inclusive approach for students with additional learning and support needs who may benefit from greater levels of structure and more intensive guidance of self-regulation skills (Kern and Clemens 2007; Osher et al. 2010; Leach and Helf 2016; Skiba et al. 2016).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> While SWPBS aims to be inclusive, there is little research exploring whether SWPBS is appropriate for, and accessible to, students with severe disabilities who require specific and comprehensive supports (Kurth and Enyart 2016). Walker et al. (2023), in a scoping review of existing literature, suggests that students with severe disabilities are not consistently included in all aspects of SWPBS.

## Early-career teachers often feel underprepared in classroom management

Any teacher may experience classroom management challenges, but early-career teachers may particularly need support to develop effective classroom management practices (Hirsch et al. 2021). Early-career teachers often report receiving inadequate training in classroom management (Hepburn and Beamish 2020; DESE 2022). Developing pre-service teachers' efficacy in classroom management has been recognised as a priority in Australia, illustrated by its inclusion in the addendum to AITSL's (2023) [Standards and Procedures](#).

Teachers are less prone to experiencing increased stress levels when they believe they have the ability to manage their classroom (Duan et al. 2024). Classroom management is known to affect the stress levels and attrition rates of new teachers (Brouwers and Tomic 2000; Klassen and Chiu 2010; Hong 2012). It is important that early-career teachers are supported through professional learning to prevent stress levels, burnout and attrition rates (Woodcock and Reupert 2024).

Professional learning in classroom management can improve teacher capabilities, along with increasing student engagement (Hirsch et al. 2021). AERO (2024a) notes that effective classroom management involves a complex skill set, and recommends that teachers develop their practice by focusing on one skill or one step of an effective practice at a time, repeating a cycle of 4 stages: rehearsal, practice, feedback and reflection. Refer to AERO's (2025b) [Supporting a colleague with refining their classroom management practice](#) guide for advice on how an experienced teacher or school leader can support colleagues with refining their classroom management practice.

## Other What Works Best 2025 resources on classroom management



- What Works Best 2025 practical guide – Classroom management
- What Works Best 2025 illustration of practice – Classroom management at Plumpton High School



## This is an extract from the **What Works Best 2025 – Evidence guide for excellent schools.**

The full evidence guide provides an overview of the evidence that underpins each of the 8 themes: high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, using data to inform practice, assessment, classroom management, wellbeing and collaboration. It also includes the references for the sources cited in this chapter.

For the full suite of What Works Best 2025 resources, including practical guides and illustrations of practice, scan the QR code or visit [education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/what-works-best](https://www.education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/what-works-best).



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