WHAT CAUSES CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR?

disruptive behaviour
Uncooperative or attention-seeking behaviours that prevent the student and others in the classroom from working. Examples include out of seat, talking out of turn, throwing objects, swearing and crawling on the floor.

sociocultural diversity
Varying community and family expectations, abilities, aspirations, attitudes, beliefs and values that influence young people's ability to fit in and cope with schooling protocols.

digital culture
What students and teachers see as engaging and valuable pedagogy is influenced by a transforming and high-pressure society that is increasingly reliant on digital technology, online participation and social media.

student disengagement
Includes socially unacceptable behaviour, inconsistent classroom attendance, poor concentration, inflexibility, low ambition, inability to cope with failure, and difficulty maintaining positive relationships with peers.

As noted above, challenging behaviour is a multifaceted issue linked to a complex set of socio-ecological factors. Therefore, as educators, it is important that we consider the systematic precursors to problem behaviour and are prepared to take a deep and meaningful look at the contexts within which students live and we teach. External factors and preceding events often precipitate challenging behaviour. As Wearmouth and colleagues (2005) point out, there is no simple cause and effect model that explains disruptive and challenging behaviour. Students exposed to unrelenting emotional concerns, sociocultural pressures and mental health issues can externalise frustration and despair as challenging behaviour. Alternatively, these same concerns, pressures and issues may be internalised and manifest as anxiety and worry. Students experiencing high levels of anxiety can present equally challenging but different sets of behaviours. It is crucial to develop high-quality and evidenced-based teaching strategies to manage the range of challenging behaviours presented by students (Paramita et al. 2020).

The process for deciding how to teach students with diverse and challenging behaviour cannot be dogmatic, as no two behavioural problems are identical or stem from the same issues. However, acknowledging the impact of **disruptive behaviour** (for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD), the effects of **sociocultural diversity**, **digital culture** and **student disengagement** has significance for directing teachers' work across the range of behavioural issues experienced in the classroom.

DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Disruptive behaviour that obstructs effective classroom teaching and learning can result from students who have diagnosed behavioural problems such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD) or ADHD, as well as students with the difficult behaviours associated with developmental conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD; refer also to Chapter 13).

A growing number of classrooms have students with these behavioural conditions, frequently accompanied by disengagement as well as mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The increasing prevalence and challenging nature of these conditions continues to be a source of stress for classroom teachers.

ODD most often begins in children below the age of ten. Children with ODD are usually argumentative (especially with parents), disobedient, stubborn, negative, annoying and aggravating. These behaviours cause difficulties at home, school and with peers. CD is a more severe behavioural disorder and is usually seen in children between 10 and 16 years of age. CD is a persistent pattern of misbehaviour that includes bullying, cruelty to animals, physical aggression, lying, stealing and vandalism.

Students with ADHD have generally been experiencing difficulties since they were toddlers. These students frequently cause management issues in the classroom because of their impulsive behaviours and difficulties with concentration and attention. They also tend to have poor self-esteem, anxiety and learning difficulties.

The reported prevalence rate of ODD and CD varies greatly between 2 per cent and 16 per cent (Australian Government 2015). ADHD is the most common behavioural disorder affecting more than 7 per cent of Australian children aged four to seventeen. It is estimated that at least one quarter of children with ODD or CD will also have ADHD (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2020c).

SOCIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

Schools exist in a rapidly changing multicultural society and therefore students begin their education with varying abilities, aspirations, attitudes, beliefs and values. More than ever, young people come to the school with mixed expectations for learning and a set of rituals, rules and routines that may be out of step with the classroom context. Community factors and family matters such as poverty, refugee status, relationship breakdowns, parental substance abuse, long-term parental unemployment and domestic violence can impact children's classroom interactions, behavioural boundaries, school attendance, and degrees of truancy, exclusion and suspension (DET 2020). Personal issues including mental health problems, physical disabilities, learning difficulties, carer responsibilities, substance abuse and criminal activity can influence the overall tenor and appropriateness of their conduct. Sociocultural diversity can bring about stressful conditions of difference that imprint on young people's ability to fit in and cope with schooling protocols. For these children, the relationship between classroom learning and future life expectations may be well and truly incompatible. Frustration and boredom can place them at risk for poor behaviour and academic disengagement. Studies have shown that students with diverse sociocultural backgrounds are more likely to:

- experience relationship problems with peers and teachers
- display poor anger management control
- have higher rates of absenteeism and truancy
- have difficulty responding to classroom rules and regulations
- frequently contribute to classroom disturbances (McIntosh et al. 2014).

Learning to respect and appreciate the cultural and stylistic differences between classroom expectations and home conditions is complex. For some students, the complexity of these social relationships exerts a great deal of pressure on their behaviour. Teachers need to recognise the impact of sociocultural conditions on student behaviour. While they cannot change the home environment, teachers can certainly make adaptations in the classroom to accommodate for students' maladaptive social practice.

DIGITAL CULTURE

Parallel to the sociocultural conditions of contemporary schooling is the fast-paced shift towards a networked and digitally advanced society. Today, most young people have access to computers and internet-enabled communication devices such as smartphones and tablet computers. These devices provide greater flexibility and opportunity for them to interact,

participate, create and engage with the world. There are many benefits to their online participation such as improved media literacy, extension of formal and informal educational outcomes, stronger social relationships, and an improved sense of self-efficacy and well-being (Third et al. 2017). However, one of the key factors associated with poor classroom behaviour is the 'disconnect' between what teachers and educators see as engaging pedagogy and what students see as engaging and valuable to their future (Egeberg et al. 2020). Many of these differences can be traced to students' out-of-school immersion in digital culture.

First, online contexts have altered young people's social landscape. Young people have greater access to peers and close friends in an adult-free zone. This freedom has been linked to an increasing number of online difficulties that include exposure to inappropriate content, risky contact with unknown people, and interpersonal problems with peers such as cyberbullying and sexting. These difficulties, particularly cyberbullying and sexting, can wash over into classroom settings and cause student distraction, anxiety, relationship problems and interpersonal aggression. The immediate problem for the teacher is the unproductive behaviour that interrupts the lesson flow and disrupts whole-class learning. However, long-term problems include persistent inattentiveness, ongoing poor conduct, social withdrawal, depression, somatic complaints and physical harm (Abi-Jaoude et al. 2020). These conditions have potential to increase challenging behaviour in the classroom.

Second, digital culture has shifted the ways in which young people learn and engage with knowledge. Students have become active and independent participants in an adaptive and flexible digital world. The life skills they need for the future require a far more engaging and transformative style of learning than traditional pedagogies provide (Jenkins et al. 2009). This shift requires teachers to be innovative with their classroom practice, able to attune to student capacities and differences, and comfortable with contemporary tools and resources such as internet-enabled devices and new media and technology services. More importantly, teachers need to provide students with the sort of learning that supports the real-life skills of the future workplace. Students who are actively engaged in their learning and see it as purposeful and meaningful are less likely to become bored, distracted and disruptive (AITSL 2017; Goss & Sonnemann 2017). Not unsurprisingly, teachers who are adaptive, innovative and creative consistently report that students are more involved in learning activities and less likely to display problem behaviours. Providing opportunities for active student engagement is a focus of these teachers and a recurrent trend in the twenty-first century learning literature (Beetham & Sharpe 2020).

STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

Although levels of student disengagement vary from school to school, disengaged behaviours (see Table 8.1) are 'extremely prevalent and teachers consider them difficult to manage' (Sullivan et al. 2014, p. 53). Key issues that place students at risk for disengagement include the three factors already discussed, but may also include school or classroom-based factors and/or cognitive and emotional problems (see Table 8.2). The Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET 2019) has also suggested that transitions from primary to secondary school can be a critical phase in engaging students to learning, with poor transitions leading to poor student engagement, absenteeism and classroom disruption. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL 2017) promotes the importance of identifying students at risk of disengagement as a means for improving classroom behaviour. However, it is important to note that engagement is not just about socially acceptable behaviour or consistent classroom attendance. Students need to be cognitively engaged; that is, concentrating and focusing on achieving goals, flexible in their work and able to

cope with failure. They need to be able to engage emotionally with peers to collaborate and communicate effectively and to establish and maintain positive relationships. A learning environment that addresses student disengagement should encourage and support positive school participation at the community, school and classroom level (AISTL 2017).

TABLE 8.2 Factors leading to student disengagement

SCHOOL OR CLASSROOM-BASED FACTORS	COGNITIVE OR EMOTIONAL FACTORS
Teacher-centred lessons	School work is too difficult or too easy
Being asked to sit too long	Not understanding what is expected
Working independently too often	Feeling undervalued
Room is too hot or too cold, too dark or too bright	Negative relationships with peers or teacher
Seating is uncomfortable	Unrelenting emotional concerns
Class is too noisy	Anxiety and worry
Not enough equipment or equipment is broken	Frustration and despair

STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

Preconceived expectations

Miss Owens

Boys are high-spirited and disruptive, they engage in rough and tumble play but boys who live in bad neighbourhoods are more likely to get up to mischief and defy school rules. I usually expect them to be more challenging than the other boys and girls. ■

PAUSE AND REFLECT

1   What do you think may be the negative consequences of the teacher positioning boys in this way?

2   Apart from living in a 'bad neighbourhood', what other conditions might explain the boys' behaviour?

3   How might Miss Owens account for these conditions in her teaching practice?