

4.1 A positive and fair classroom environment

The social and emotional learning environment and the physical environment significantly impact student learning, engagement, attitude and wellbeing. Calm, supportive and well-managed environments encourage engagement with learning. The design of the physical environment and the features within can facilitate or constrain social interactions and effect concentration.⁹³ Student behaviour, engagement and achievement are supported through effective classroom environments.⁹⁴

Survey findings

- 60 per cent of Year 3 to Year 6 students said they ‘always’ get along with their teachers.
- 77 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they ‘usually’ get along with their teachers.
- Almost two-thirds of Year 7 to Year 12 students (63%) reported that teachers treat students fairly ‘most of the time’.
- The same proportion of students (63%) reported having been treated unfairly by a teacher at least once in the past.

Students’ assessment of fairness in teachers

Year 7 to Year 12 students were asked to assess teacher fairness towards students through a number of statements. These statements were not part of the survey for younger students.

A little less than two-thirds of students (62.8%) reported that teachers treat students fairly ‘most of the time’ but one in 10 (8.7%) said that teachers ‘hardly ever’ treat students fairly.

There were no significant differences found between male and female students, students in regional and metropolitan areas or Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in regard to their assessment of teachers’ fairness towards students (see also Chapter 3.2 – Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future).

Table 4.1: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students who said teachers at their school treat students fairly most of the time, sometimes or hardly ever, by selected characteristics

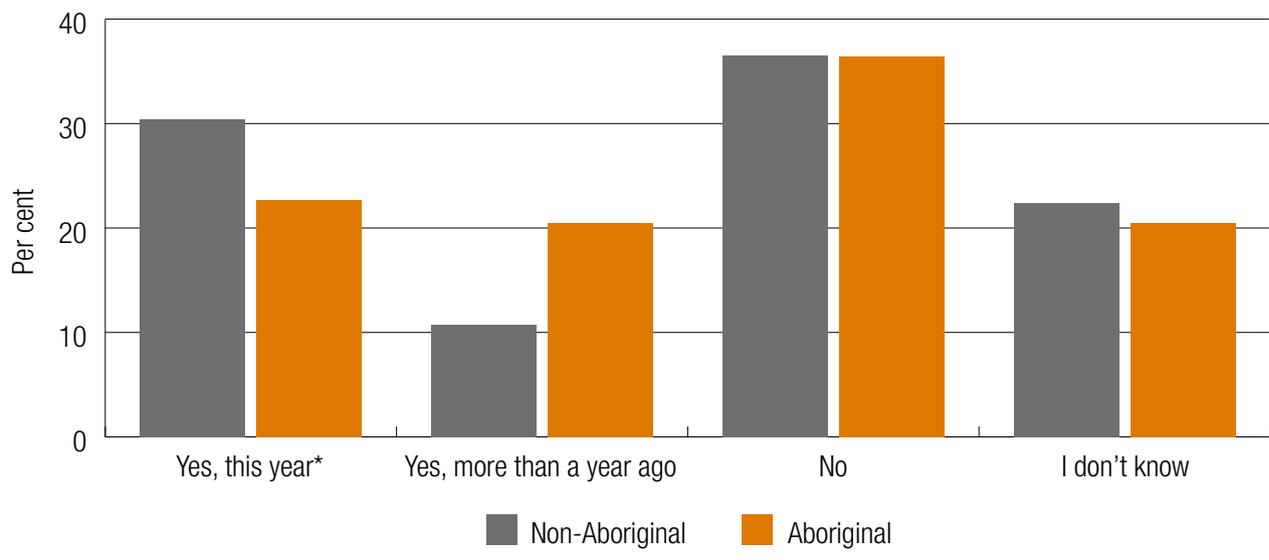
	Male	Female	Other*	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Most of the time	65.3	62.1	0.0	63.9	62.4	63.2	56.8	62.8
Sometimes	25.6	30.5	33.3	28.8	28.3	28.1	34.1	28.5
Hardly ever	9.1	7.4	66.7	7.2	9.3	8.8	9.1	8.7

* $n < 10$

More than one-third of Year 7 to Year 12 students (36.6%) said they had never been treated unfairly, while 30 per cent said they had been treated unfairly ‘within the last month’ or ‘this year’. Again, there was no significant difference found between the genders or students in regional and metropolitan areas in regard to this question.

Aboriginal students were the group least likely to say they had been treated unfairly by a teacher in the past month or year. Compared to their non-Aboriginal peers, Aboriginal students were more likely to say they had experienced unfair treatment more than a year ago.

Graph 4.1: Proportion of students saying they have been treated unfairly (e.g. treated differently) by a teacher this year, more than a year ago, never or they don’t know, by Aboriginal status



* Includes students who answered ‘yes, this month’ or ‘yes, this year’.

Table 4.2: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they have been treated unfairly (e.g. treated differently) by a teacher this year, more than a year ago, never or they don’t know, by selected characteristics

	Male	Female	Other**	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Yes, this year*	30.2	29.0	66.7	30.0	29.4	30.4	22.7	29.9
Yes, more than a year ago	10.9	11.8	0.0	10.8	12.5	10.7	20.5	11.3
No	36.1	37.2	16.7	37.6	34.1	36.5	36.4	36.6
I don't know	22.8	22.1	16.7	21.6	24.0	22.4	20.5	22.3

* Includes students who answered ‘yes, this month’ or ‘yes, this year’.

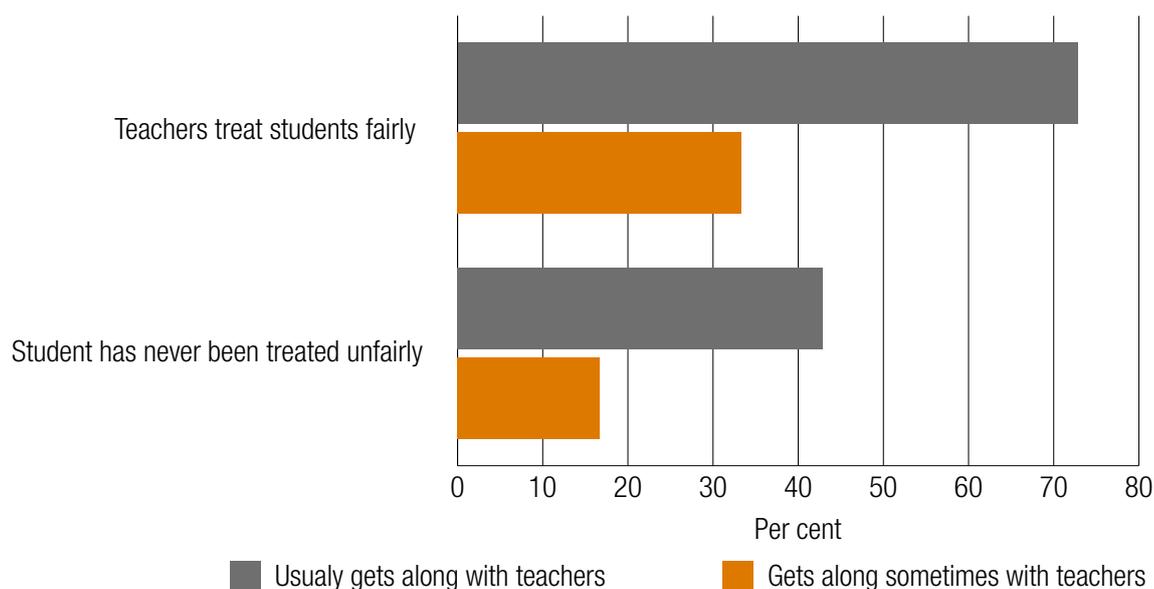
** n<10

Students who get along with teachers – Year 7 to Year 12

For Year 7 to Year 12 students, compared to students who said they get along with their teachers ‘sometimes’, those who said they get along with their teachers ‘usually’ were more likely to highly rate teacher fairness:

- Students say that teachers treat students fairly ‘most of the time’ (72.8% versus 33.3%).
- Students say they have never been treated unfairly (e.g. treated differently) (42.9% versus 16.7%).

Graph 4.2: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreeing with selected statements about teachers, by how well they get along with teachers



Students who feel they are being treated fairly – Year 7 to Year 12

Year 7 to Year 12 students who said that teachers treat students fairly ‘most of the time’ and who have also never been treated unfairly were more likely than students who said teachers treat students fairly ‘sometimes’ or less and who also said they have been treated unfairly in the past to give a positive rating on the following engagement indicators.

- Students like school ‘a lot’ (49.8% versus 12.5%)
- Students feel part of their school (89.8% versus 58.9%)
- Students say that being at school every day is ‘very important’ to them (80.9% versus 50.6%).

No significant association was found between students’ perceptions of teacher fairness and their academic achievement.

Group discussion findings

“It’s hard for some kids to learn. If the student’s teacher does not explain the work. If a classroom is not organised, if students don’t calm down after a particularly physical activity.” (Year 3 to Year 6)

The physical and social environment in which students are learning has implications for their emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement. Students across Year 3 to Year 12 spoke strongly about the social and physical environment in which they are expected to learn and identified a range of factors that facilitate and discourage engagement with learning. Largely, factors related to the relationships with teachers, friends and peers that contributed to the social environment. Students valued a calm and well-managed environment that enhanced behaviour and created a feeling of safety for learning, which contributed positively to learning progress.

Student comments also related to changing the physical infrastructure of the school to create an inviting and enriching learning environment. For some students this meant having access to resources that were functional and supported their learning. For others it meant more interesting playgrounds to enable them to be active at lunch time. Others wanted access to nature or designs that accounted for the weather.

Students had various suggestions as to how the environment could be improved to support them, their learning and their experiences of school, and they wanted opportunities to contribute to the development of the school environment. Providing students with the opportunity to have a say in the creation of a learning environment that best suits their needs promotes engagement with school and learning, and promotes autonomy and responsibility for learning. Additionally, creating physically and emotionally inviting and safe environments from the perspective of students contributes to the development of child safe organisations.⁹⁵

Social environment

Quality classroom social environments contributed to student wellbeing and learning. Such environments were characterised by support, kindness, positivity and where there were no judgements. Relationships with and behaviours of teachers and other students were critical in creating this environment. In particular, teachers influenced this environment through relational practices and through classroom management. Teachers treating all students fairly and working in ways to include all students were important factors in this regard. When students felt comfortable and safe they explained they were able to concentrate on learning, felt more confident and not worried about making mistakes.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“Because it was a safe place to learn about new things.”</i></p> <p><i>“Not annoying other people learning.”</i></p> <p><i>“Be kind and friendly.”</i></p> <p><i>“Be friendly to them because they can learn what is right and what is not right!”</i></p> <p><i>“If all the kids will be quiet.”</i></p> <p><i>“People stop bullying other kids.”</i></p> <p><i>“Letting other people work in peace.”</i></p> <p><i>“I liked when [my teacher] was here and I worked a lot and I loved the safe environment I was in.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Smaller classes, make it more enjoyable and easy to focus.”</i></p> <p><i>“Being able to express thoughts and beliefs without being judged or oppressed.”</i></p> <p><i>“Including each other.”</i></p> <p><i>“How fair the teachers are. Staying on topic when talking.”</i></p> <p><i>“Being surrounded by positive people.”</i></p> <p><i>“Feeling safe and comfortable in the school.”</i></p> <p><i>“Fun, happy environment whilst still doing work – (not feeling like you’re in jail).”</i></p> <p><i>“Where there is no interruptions.”</i></p> <p><i>“Quiet and stable learning environments.”</i></p>

Feeling calm and ready was important for learning. Students described various strategies that support calmness for learning; this included breaks, being physically active, pets, friends, meditation, nature, music, sleep and familiar objects such as toys. Students were less likely to be able to emotionally or cognitively engage in learning if they were feeling anxious or worried, regardless of whether the source of their anxiety or worry were the consequences of pedagogy, curriculum content, or concerns with family, other students or school staff.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“All the fun things we do during lunch and recess [helps kids like learning].”</i></p> <p><i>“Maybe have two to three minutes of chat time between lessons.”</i></p> <p><i>“When they get a break.”</i></p> <p><i>“When they have to be inside for too long [makes it hard to learn].”</i></p> <p><i>“When they’ve got a pet.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Sport was really enjoyable</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>being physical and not sitting around in a chair forever</i> • <i>different uniform/comfortable</i> • <i>sport helped relax me.”</i> <p><i>“When there is breaks between each class.”</i></p> <p><i>“Sport and recreational activities to give us a break from the dullness of a long maths class.”</i></p>

Classroom environments that were characterised by fear, negativity, hostility, lack of control, rowdiness, people yelling or distractions were not seen as conducive to learning. The behaviour of other students and teachers influenced classroom dynamics and student sense of safety and comfort in the classroom. Bullying and intimidation from other students and teachers were noted as negatively affecting this and are discussed further in Chapter 3.2 – Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future and Chapter 4.6 – Feeling safe.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“When people yell at you for getting an answer wrong.”</i></p> <p><i>“A bad state of the classroom – others stay away from those who need extra help.”</i></p> <p><i>“Unhappy learning environment.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Being with negative people.”</i></p> <p><i>“Not being a part of the class/activity (not participating).”</i></p> <p><i>“In school conflict.”</i></p> <p><i>“Aggressive.”</i></p> <p><i>“Hard to concentrate sometimes.”</i></p> <p><i>“Keeping quiet.”</i></p> <p><i>“Hostile school environment.”</i></p> <p><i>“Kids don’t fit in.”</i></p>

General distractions, such as outside noise and the behaviour of other students, were commonly described by students as a factor that made it difficult to learn. Students indicated that disruptions from other students impinged on their own right to learn and their ability to engage in learning. The behaviours described were largely low-level disruptive behaviour, such as talking out of turn, being rowdy or noisy, moving around and interfering with property, rather than aggressive and anti-social behaviour.^{96 97} Such behaviour affects teacher temperament and ability to teach, and the learning of students.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“If people make lots of noise and talk to them because some people listen to the noise and they get off track which stops them learning.”</i></p> <p><i>“Have no interruptions in class from other students.”</i></p> <p><i>“It makes it hard for some kids to learn because the teacher has to stop between a lesson to deal with naughty people.”</i></p> <p><i>“When kids are being silly and calling out.”</i></p> <p><i>“When kids call out and don’t listen to the teachers.”</i></p> <p><i>“Other kids frustrating other kids.”</i></p> <p><i>“When kids steal our stuff (like pencils and things like that).”</i></p> <p><i>“Lock down.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Loud classroom.”</i></p> <p><i>“Loss of concentration.”</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes I know it’s hard to learn when the environment is loud, noisy and distracting.”</i></p> <p><i>“Other people distract you with useless information (e.g. cat memes).”⁹⁸</i></p> <p><i>“Some people’s classes are extremely disruptive which make it hard to learn. Most of the time, it’s people gossiping when they should be doing it at break/lunch time.”</i></p> <p><i>“When people muck around.”</i></p> <p><i>“Poor behaviour.”</i></p> <p><i>“Distractions in the class such as people being loud and disruptive.”</i></p>

Students in Year 7 to Year 12 saw that responsibility for managing the classroom environment lay with the teacher. However, students explained that sometimes teachers could not, or chose not to, enforce classroom rules and to manage the environment.

Year 7 to Year 12

“Relief teachers or just normal teachers who can’t control the class.”

“When other kids are misbehaving and teachers don’t do anything about it.”

Students valued teachers who used positive behavioural management and were responsive when other students were disruptive. Such practices supported student engagement with learning, feelings of safety within the classroom, student wellbeing and facilitated relationships with teachers. Teacher practices are discussed further in Chapter 3.2 – Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future.

Physical environment

The design of physical environment can play a large role in creating social learning spaces that promote and facilitate interactions between students and teachers and participation in classroom activities. Students noted the physical environment as influencing their level of concentration and, on occasion, ability to work. Within the physical environment students discussed the physical space, availability of resources and external elements, such as the weather.

Students had a preference for learning outside or in open classrooms that allowed natural airflow. Students explained that working outside should not only be relegated to sports, but enjoyed opportunities to be outside such as reading under a tree. Music was another factor that generally supported concentration in class.

Reliable resources for learning were essential for students. Their comments referred to whether schools were enabled with resources and, if available, whether resources were used.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>"Soft seat."</i></p> <p><i>"Music."</i></p> <p><i>"I would change the weather when it's cold."</i></p> <p><i>"I would change technology and make it have no problems."</i></p> <p><i>"Because it is outside."</i></p> <p><i>"Silence."</i></p> <p><i>"Computers and paper with websites and people to explain things."</i></p> <p><i>"Work charts."</i></p> <p><i>"Dictionaries."</i></p>	<p><i>"I liked the environment and air."</i></p> <p><i>"Outdoor activities."</i></p> <p><i>"Listening to music in class because it helps me concentrate."</i></p> <p><i>"When we work outside (I don't like classrooms)."</i></p> <p><i>"Able to listen to music during study."</i></p> <p><i>"Open window/breeze."</i></p> <p><i>"Great facilities (learning area)."</i></p> <p><i>"When they take us outside and let us sit spaciouly, so we aren't under everyone's skin."</i></p>

The seating arrangement in the classroom was also an important factor for students in Year 7 to Year 12. Students preferred to have a choice in their seating arrangement as this enabled them to sit with friends or in positions to minimise distractions, such as the front of the class. Seating plans can be used as a form of control or behavioural management or used to provide students with choice and empower them to make decisions for their learning. Through the consultations, students explained that when they are able to sit with their friends they felt at ease and therefore able to concentrate on learning.

Year 7 to Year 12

"Sitting at the front of the class so you don't get distracted."

"No seating plan."

"Where they sit."

While generally noted as positive, there were some comments from students in Year 7 to Year 12 indicating being outside and music can be distractions to learning. These differing opinions underscore the importance of involving students in creating learning environments that work for them. Disorganised classrooms and a lack of resources were also noted as unhelpful.

Year 7 to Year 12

"Music distracts people."

"Messy classrooms – I cannot concentrate with a messy or noisy class."

"Big classrooms (lots of people)."

"Cold classroom."

"Bad internet."

"Lack of resources."

"Not having a seating plan."

Suggestions from students

Learning within a safe, calm, supportive and functional environment was significant for engagement in learning. Students referred to the behaviours of other students and teachers as critical for creating a learning environment that supported engagement. As such, their suggestions for change related to modifying disruptive student behaviour, school staff enforcing behaviour management and working with school staff to create a positive learning environment. These suggestions are explored in more detail in Chapter 3.2 – Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future and Chapter 4.2 – A supportive classroom environment.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“People stop disrupting class.”</i></p> <p><i>“More nice people.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I would like to have classes to separate the ‘disruptive’ students from the ‘focused’ students.”</i></p>

Several strategies were also put forward to promote calmness for learning. These included breaks, pets or animals, meditation, friends and nature.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“Meditation to refresh us.”</i></p> <p><i>“More nature.”</i></p> <p><i>“More free time because our brain gets relaxed for more hard work.”</i></p> <p><i>“10 minutes of reading time after recess/lunch to calm everybody down.”</i></p> <p><i>“More time at lunch because we can waste our energy.”</i></p> <p><i>“Work outside because you get fresh air.”</i></p> <p><i>“Be allowed to bring teddies into school because you might get sad and teddies cheer you up and you can bring them everywhere.”</i></p> <p><i>“Bring in pets (to calm down and distract from problems).”</i></p> <p><i>“Pets improve health and education.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Pets in class.”</i></p> <p><i>“Headphones and food in class.”</i></p> <p><i>“Nap time.”</i></p> <p><i>“Would probably have music in school.”</i></p>

Classrooms and resources that were functional, comfortable, inviting and that contributed positively to the social environment were requested to promote engagement with learning, ensure hygiene (as noted in Chapter 4.8 – Feeling physically and mentally well) and increase feelings of safety at school (as noted in Chapter 4.6 – Feeling safe).

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“Make the school class chairs more comfortable.”</i></p> <p><i>“I want more sport time and 21st century classrooms because they are more comfy.”</i></p> <p><i>“Bigger classrooms and book-boxes.”</i></p> <p><i>“Working clocks.”</i></p> <p><i>“Library not to have the music room [in it].”</i></p>	<p><i>“Open plan learning spaces – creating a more relaxed environment for students (couches, bean bags, etc.)”</i></p>