

Perceptions of Teacher Communication Styles in Managing Classroom Behavior in Australian High Schools

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines Australian high school students' perceptions of teacher communication styles in classroom behavior management. While disciplinary practices are often analyzed from institutional perspectives, this research prioritizes student voices to explore how communication is experienced, interpreted, and shapes classroom dynamics. "Perceptions of Teacher Communication Styles in Managing Classroom Behavior in Australian High Schools" Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 71 students from Year 10 to Year 12 across three diverse schools (one urban, one regional, and one suburban) in Australia. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-stage process outlined by Doyle et al. (2020), resulting in the identification of eleven key themes related to fairness, empathy, and emotional impact. Findings indicate that students respond more favorably to communication that balances authority with respect and clarity with compassion. Negative reactions—such as disengagement or resistance—often arose from communication perceived as harsh, public, or demeaning. Conversely, calm and respectful interactions fostered trust and engagement. The study underscores the significance of relational communication in behavior management, suggesting that effective discipline is not just procedural but fundamentally interpersonal. These insights offer valuable implications for teacher training, advocating for strategies that uphold student dignity while cultivating positive classroom environments.

KEYWORDS *Communication, Perception, Behavior, Students, Relational*



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INTRODUCTION

The way teachers communicate with students plays a fundamental role in shaping the learning environment, influencing not only how information is received but also how students engage emotionally and socially within the classroom. In the context of managing student behavior a core component of effective teaching communication becomes more than a simple tool; it is a powerful mediator of relationships, perceptions of fairness, and emotional safety (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). In high schools, where students are navigating a critical stage of adolescent development, the style and tone of teacher communication during disciplinary interactions can significantly impact how students perceive their teachers, their peers, and the classroom climate (Amerstorfer & von Münster-Kistner, 2021).

While disciplinary practices have been widely studied in educational research, there is a tendency for these studies to focus on rules, systems of consequences, and teacher authority from the educator's or institutional perspective (Reeve, 2016). Less

often are students' voices centered in exploring how communication feels, how it is interpreted, and what emotional or behavioral consequences it produces (Inayat & Ali, 2020). Yet, students are not passive recipients of discipline; they are active participants in the relational dynamic that discipline entails. Their perceptions matter, especially when considering the long-term implications of school experiences on their sense of autonomy, respect, and engagement (Kalin, Peklaj, Pečjak, Levpušček, & Zuljan, 2017).

In classrooms across Australia, teachers encounter daily challenges in managing behavior while maintaining positive relationships with students. As schools emphasize inclusive education, emotional wellbeing, and culturally responsive pedagogy, there is a growing need to examine not only what teachers say, but how they say it—and how that is received by students (Donohoo, 2018). Communication is a multifaceted process that involves verbal and non-verbal cues, including tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language (Hills, 2025; Saggese, 2023). These elements contribute significantly to how messages are interpreted, particularly during moments of behavioral correction or conflict (Martin, Budhrani, & Wang, 2019).

Adolescents are acutely sensitive to issues of justice, respect, and autonomy. When a teacher addresses misbehavior in a way that feels humiliating, condescending, or aggressive, the student's response may be one of resistance, withdrawal, or emotional distress (Wolff, Jarodzka, van den Bogert, & Boshuizen, 2016). On the other hand, when a teacher communicates calmly, respectfully, and clearly, even difficult conversations can become opportunities for learning and relationship-building. (Avcı, 2016) Students are capable of distinguishing between communication that enforces rules with empathy and authority, versus communication that enforces rules through fear or control. These distinctions often shape students' willingness to cooperate, their attitudes toward school authority, and their overall classroom experience (Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2021).

Despite the importance of this issue, there remains a gap in research that specifically examines how students themselves perceive different communication styles used by teachers in disciplinary contexts (Anagün, 2018). Particularly in Australian high schools, which serve students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, students' perceptions may vary greatly based on personal experiences, identity, and school culture (Bonner, Warren, & Jiang, 2018). Understanding these perceptions not only provides insight into student behavior, but also offers valuable feedback to educators seeking to foster more effective and respectful classroom management practices (Chen et al., 2021; Franklin & Harrington, 2019; Mitchell, Hirn, & Lewis, 2017; Sinclair, 2024).

This research aims to fill that gap by exploring how high school students in Australia interpret and respond to teacher communication styles when behavior issues arise in the classroom (Egeberg, McConney, & Price, 2021; Iaconelli & Anderman, 2021; Shakoor, Lateef, & Mehmood, 2025). It seeks to uncover how students' perceptions evolve across different year levels, corresponding to their stages of

cognitive and emotional development (Kulal & Nayak, 2020). Year 10 students, typically aged around 15–16, are often more focused on immediate social dynamics and emotional responses. Year 11 students begin to develop analytical thinking and can compare experiences more critically. Year 12 students, approaching the end of their secondary education, are generally capable of higher levels of reflection and contextual understanding. By structuring the research according to these developmental stages, the study aims to capture a broad and nuanced picture of student perspectives.

The research is grounded in the belief that effective communication is not merely about transmitting information or asserting control—it is about building relationships, maintaining mutual respect, and promoting understanding. In situations where students violate classroom rules or norms, the teacher’s approach to communication can either escalate tension or create a space for constructive dialogue. Some students may feel deeply uncomfortable or embarrassed when reprimanded publicly, while others may appreciate a teacher’s calm and fair demeanor. The same disciplinary action can be perceived differently depending on how it is delivered. Exploring these subtleties is essential for improving classroom climate and supporting both academic and social-emotional outcomes for students.

Teachers often face pressure to respond quickly and authoritatively when disruptions occur, especially in large or diverse classrooms. In these moments, communication becomes both a strategy and a test of relational skill. While policies and disciplinary frameworks may guide what consequences should be applied, the how—the language, tone, and timing—remains largely in the hands of individual educators. Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs may not always provide sufficient training in the interpersonal aspects of discipline, particularly in how students emotionally experience different forms of communication (Laho, 2019). Student insights into this area can therefore inform not only day-to-day practice but also professional development and teacher education more broadly.

This study approaches communication as a two-way process that shapes and is shaped by the student-teacher relationship. It pays particular attention to how communication is perceived in terms of fairness, empathy, and respect—three elements that students frequently identify as central to positive school experiences. The study also considers the emotional impact of different communication approaches, such as being spoken to calmly versus being yelled at, being corrected in private versus in front of peers, or being given an explanation for rules versus receiving directives without context.

In selecting Australian high schools as the setting for this research, the study also acknowledges the country’s commitment to inclusive education and the promotion of student voice in learning environments. Australia’s educational landscape is marked by its cultural diversity, emphasis on wellbeing, and complex debates around student behavior and teacher authority. By exploring student perspectives within this national

context, the research hopes to contribute both to local understandings and to broader international conversations about communication, discipline, and relational pedagogy.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is not to prescribe a singular “correct” way for teachers to manage behavior, but to illuminate the voices of those most affected by these interactions: the students. By examining how young people perceive teacher communication styles in moments of correction or discipline, we can gain insight into what fosters trust, what damages it, and how communication can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier to effective teaching. In doing so, this study aims to support teachers in developing communication strategies that are not only effective in maintaining order but also affirming of student dignity and conducive to long-term engagement.

In centering student experiences, the research hopes to elevate their role as active contributors to the educational process, rather than as mere recipients of instruction and control. Through their reflections, stories, and insights, students provide valuable perspectives on what it means to be heard, respected, and understood in the classroom. These perspectives, in turn, can help reshape the way we think about classroom management—not simply as a question of behavior, but as a practice of communication, empathy, and mutual growth.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore high school students’ perceptions of teacher communication styles in managing classroom behavior (Doyle et al., 2020). A qualitative approach proved well-suited for understanding personal experiences, emotional responses, and nuanced interpretations of interpersonal communication in complex classroom environments. Open-ended questions and narrative responses captured the depth of students' perspectives across year levels.

The study was structured by grade level (Year 10, Year 11, and Year 12), with tailored questions aligned to each group's developmental stage. This layered design revealed developmental trends in perception and reasoning related to teacher-student communication.

Participants were drawn from three Australian high schools (one urban, one regional, and one suburban) using purposive sampling to select students in Years 10–12, capturing diverse perspectives across educational stages (Kamau et al., 2023). The target was 10–12 students per year level per school (90–108 total), balancing gender, cultural background, and academic performance where feasible. Participation was voluntary, requiring parental consent, student assent, and approval from school administration and educational authorities.

Semi-structured individual interviews served as the primary data collection method, supplemented by optional short written responses to warm-up questions (Stanley, 2023; Doyle et al., 2020). Each 20–30-minute interview was audio-recorded (with consent), conducted in a quiet school room, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed

using thematic analysis per Doyle et al. (2020). This six-stage process systematically identified, analyzed, and interpreted patterns in the data (Siedlecki, 2020). Manual coding emphasized researcher-led interpretation, enhanced by member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation across schools and year levels for trustworthiness (Ni et al., 2022).

The research adhered to ethical guidelines for minors, with university HREC approval and consents from state education departments and schools. Key considerations included informed consent, anonymity, harm minimization, voluntary participation, and secure data storage (Stanley, 2023). As a qualitative study, findings offered rich contextual insights rather than statistical generalization, acknowledging potential power dynamics mitigated through rapport-building and confidentiality assurances.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study explores how secondary school students in Australia perceive and respond to their teachers' communication styles when managing classroom behavior. Interviews were conducted with students from Year 10 to Year 12, including one student who requested to remain anonymous. From the collected narratives, several key themes consistently emerged, reflecting students' emotional experiences, expectations, and critiques regarding how teachers communicate in the context of discipline and classroom management.

Tone of Voice: Influencing Classroom Atmosphere and Student Response

Most students emphasized the importance of a teacher's tone of voice when correcting or giving instructions. A raised or shouting tone was often interpreted as aggressive and tension-inducing, rather than problem-solving. Jackson and Skye from Year 10, as well as Julian and Isabella from Year 12, noted that yelling loses its effectiveness over time because students become desensitized. In contrast, a calm yet firm approach was seen as far more effective. Tone of voice was also strongly associated with respect. Students viewed a composed and polite tone as a mark of a respectable teacher. Teachers who remained calm in heated situations fostered a sense of safety and encouraged positive responses from students. Conversely, harsh or sarcastic tones made students feel belittled or even humiliated.

Public Correction vs. Private Discussion: Dignity and Effectiveness

Nearly all students expressed that being scolded or corrected in front of peers was embarrassing and counterproductive. Jackson described it as "humiliating," while Skye said such approaches seemed aimed at "making an example" rather than resolving the issue. Sabella and Lily from Year 11 agreed that private discussions were more

respectful and encouraged openness. Teachers who opted for private corrections were seen as figures who respected students' dignity. While public correction was sometimes considered necessary for maintaining order, students consistently viewed private approaches as more effective in the long run.

Assertiveness Without Aggression: The Key to Effective Leadership

Many students made a distinction between teachers who were assertive and those who were aggressive. Teachers who could establish boundaries in a calm and clear manner garnered more respect. Julian and Isabella stressed that being assertive does not mean being authoritarian or lacking empathy. Sabella noted that being “strict but calm” was an ideal combination for establishing authority without inciting resistance. A firm tone and steady presence reinforced by confident posture and appropriate facial expressions were seen as forms of nonverbal communication that strengthened the verbal message.

Explaining Rules and the Reasons Behind Them: Promoting Compliance and Fairness

This theme emerged strongly across student narratives. Students felt that rules without explanations came across as arbitrary and more about control than fostering a positive learning environment. Jackson highlighted the importance of teachers explaining the rationale behind rules, helping students understand rather than merely obey them. Skye pointed out that statements like “Because I said so” undermined the teacher’s credibility and made rules feel irrelevant. On the other hand, when teachers linked rules to logical reasons or shared benefits, students found it easier to accept and felt intellectually respected.

Fairness and Consistency: Foundations of Respect

Fair treatment was a recurring concern. Students voiced frustration over differential treatment, teachers jumping to conclusions without hearing their side, or displaying favoritism. Skye and Julian mentioned that even “just two seconds” of listening could help avoid misunderstandings and make students feel fairly treated. Fairness wasn’t just about listening it was also about consistency in enforcing rules. When one student was reprimanded for a behavior while another wasn’t, the teacher’s credibility suffered. Clarity, consistency, and openness were seen as key factors in determining whether a teacher was perceived as fair.

Empathetic Teachers Are Preferred

Students showed a strong preference for empathetic teachers—those who could see things from the student’s perspective and didn’t rush to punish without understanding the context. Julian explicitly said that empathy made teachers more

respected. Empathy was also reflected in how teachers responded to stress or problematic behavior—not with anger, but with patience and understanding. Teachers who could manage their emotions and think clearly during conflict were seen as both professionally and emotionally competent.

Humor and Personal Connection: A Double-Edged Sword

Some students, such as Lily and Sabella, mentioned that teachers who used humor could make the classroom atmosphere more enjoyable and reduce tension. However, they also warned that excessive humor—especially when used to correct behavior—could undermine authority or feel mocking. Julian pointed out that sarcasm could lead to misunderstandings and worsen situations, especially if students felt they were being “played” or not taken seriously. Therefore, balancing friendliness with professionalism was seen as essential.

Communication as a Tool for Mediation, Not Just Control

Isabella and Julian emphasized that ideal teachers are not just classroom controllers, but also conflict mediators. Effective communication could prevent conflicts from escalating, calm tense situations, and build a cooperative classroom culture. Skills like de-escalation, active listening, and giving students space to voice their perspectives were seen as important teacher competencies. When teachers positioned themselves as facilitators of dialogue rather than judges, students were more likely to respond openly and positively.

Direct Impact on Learning and Emotional Wellbeing

Students recognized that teachers’ communication styles influenced not just discipline, but also the overall learning environment. Teachers who yelled or belittled students induced fear, shame, or frustration, ultimately disrupting students’ focus. In contrast, teachers who maintained positive communication created a supportive, low-pressure environment. This encouraged active participation, self-confidence, and a classroom climate conducive to both academic and emotional development.

Students’ Recommendations for New Teachers: Be Calm, Clear, and Humane

In closing, several students offered advice for new teachers: stay calm, clearly explain the rules, listen to students, and treat them as human beings rather than just subjects of discipline. Students weren’t asking for the removal of rules, but rather for rules to be enforced in a fair, communicative, and dignified way.

Perceptions of Teacher Friendliness: Balancing Authority with Approachability

Despite expressing criticism toward certain disciplinary approaches, most students still viewed their teachers as friendly and approachable in general. This perception was particularly strong for teachers like Mathew, Tracey, Michael, and Debra, whom students described as having a “good balance” between maintaining authority and showing kindness. When asked to rate these teachers on a scale of friendliness, students gave Mathew and Tracey an average of 85%, Michael 78%, and Debra 82%. These high ratings suggest that being firm does not necessarily contradict being friendly. In fact, many students emphasized that they appreciated teachers who could enforce rules clearly while still treating students with warmth and respect.

Some students, including Skye and Lily, said that they saw their teachers as “kind most of the time” and that occasional strictness didn’t cancel out a generally positive relationship. Students appeared to separate momentary disciplinary incidents from the teacher’s overall personality. This distinction reflects the idea that friendliness is not about avoiding confrontation, but about how teachers handle it—with empathy, fairness, and emotional regulation. This further reinforces the view that positive communication is a long-term investment; even when conflict arises, students are more forgiving toward teachers they perceive as consistently humane and respectful.

Students consistently emphasized that a teacher’s tone of voice plays a vital role in setting the classroom atmosphere and in the effectiveness of behavior management. According to Albert Mehrabian’s (1971) theory of nonverbal communication, tone of voice contributes up to 38% of the meaning interpreted by listeners in interpersonal interactions—greater than the impact of the actual words used. Teachers who speak in a raised or yelling tone are perceived as aggressive, which, based on this theory, may hinder the development of a positive perception among students. Furthermore, within the framework of the *Authoritative Teaching Style* (Baumrind, 1971), teachers who demonstrate authority without intimidation are seen as more effective. A calm yet firm manner of speaking reflects an authoritative approach that combines structure with warmth. This style, according to Pianta & Hamre (2009), supports healthy teacher–student relationships and enhances students’ engagement in the learning process.

Open criticism in front of the class is perceived as degrading and causes embarrassment, aligning with the *Face Theory* by Brown and Levinson (1987), which emphasizes the importance of maintaining one’s “face” or dignity in social interaction. When a teacher publicly reprimands a student, it threatens their “positive face”—the need to be appreciated and accepted. Conversely, private correction is seen as more respectful and preserves interpersonal relations. This approach is supported by *Restorative Practices* in education, which emphasize dialogue and relationship restoration rather than public punishment. By discussing behavioral issues in private, teachers demonstrate empathy and create a safe space for students to reflect on their actions without the added pressure of peer judgment.

Students made a clear distinction between assertiveness and aggression. This aligns with the classroom management theory by Wolfgang and Glickman (1986), which categorizes management styles into authoritarian, permissive, and assertive. Teachers who adopt an assertive style—setting clear boundaries with consistency and a positive demeanor—are considered most effective in managing behavior while preserving interpersonal rapport. Furthermore, Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* (1977) suggests that students learn through observation of modeled behavior. Teachers who display calmness, self-control, and consistency serve as concrete examples of how to manage conflict maturely—an especially important model during adolescence, when students are still developing emotional regulation skills.

Many students indicated they are more accepting of rules when given a logical explanation. This is related to Lawrence Kohlberg's *Cognitive Moral Development Theory* (1981), which posits that individuals—especially adolescents—are more likely to accept rules if they understand the moral or rational reasons behind them. Additionally, the *Transactional Communication Model* by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) posits that communication is a two-way process. When teachers explain rules, they are not merely delivering a message but also inviting students to understand and agree with the reasoning behind the regulation. This enhances cognitive engagement and the likelihood of internalizing discipline as a personal value, rather than merely complying out of fear of punishment.

Issues of fairness raised by students highlight the importance of trust in teacher–student relationships. According to *Equity Theory* (Adams, 1963), individuals evaluate fairness by comparing their input and outcomes with those of others. If a student perceives different treatment between peers, it may lead to perceptions of injustice, reducing motivation and loyalty to classroom norms. Consistency is also a key component of teacher credibility. *Credibility Theory* (McCroskey, 1992) emphasizes that behavioral consistency is essential to how students perceive a teacher's reliability. Teachers who enforce rules uniformly, without favoritism, build respected authority rather than feared dominance.

Students' preference for empathetic teachers aligns with Daniel Goleman's theory of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). Teachers who can regulate their own emotions, understand students' perspectives, and respond compassionately are seen as more professional and effective. Teacher empathy is also essential in creating *Psychological Safety* in the classroom, a concept developed by Edmondson (1999), which refers to the sense that students can make mistakes, ask questions, or voice concerns without fear of negative consequences. When teachers respond empathetically, students are more open and feel valued as individuals, not just learners.

Students noted that humor can either strengthen or harm teacher–student relationships. In this context, the *Benign Violation Theory* (McGraw & Warren, 2010) explains that humor is effective when a norm is violated in a way that is perceived as

non-threatening. When humor becomes sarcasm or mockery, the violation is no longer benign, and tension or harm may result. Teachers must balance social closeness with professionalism. *Role Theory* in education suggests that teachers must maintain their role as instructional leaders, not allowing humor to blur authority boundaries. This is crucial in avoiding perceptions of bias or lack of objectivity in behavior management.

Some students described the ideal teacher as one who acts as a mediator in conflict, not merely an enforcer of rules. This aligns with *Collaborative Problem Solving* (Greene, 2001), which emphasizes open dialogue in addressing behavioral issues. In this approach, teachers and students work together to identify the root cause of the problem and agree on solutions. This mediative communication also reflects the principles of *Dialogic Pedagogy* (Freire, 1970), where the teacher is not an absolute authority but a learning facilitator who encourages critical thinking and reflection. In such a context, students are not just compliant but also feel ownership of their behavior and responsibility for classroom harmony.

Students recognized that teachers' communication styles directly affect the learning climate and their emotional wellbeing. This is consistent with the *Self-Determination Theory* (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which argues that learning environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster intrinsic motivation. Communicative, fair, and empathetic teachers create supportive learning climates. In contrast, authoritarian, inconsistent, or sarcastic teachers foster pressured environments that can decrease motivation and increase academic stress.

Students' advice to new teachers to be "calm, clear, and human" reflects expectations for 21st-century teaching competencies. According to professional teaching standards (such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers), interpersonal competence and empathic communication are essential parts of reflective practice and responsive pedagogy. Teachers must be trained to understand adolescent psychosocial dynamics, manage conflict restoratively, and develop effective two-way communication. This underscores that behavior management is not just about control but also about cultivating respectful and trusting relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Australian high school students view teacher communication as a pivotal relational force in classroom behavior management, favoring calm, fair, private approaches that balance authority with empathy, clarity, and respect to build trust, cooperation, and a positive learning climate, while harsh, public, or inconsistent styles provoke disengagement, resistance, and emotional distress. The findings emphasize that effective discipline is inherently interpersonal, centering on students' needs for dignity, explanation, and psychological safety. For future research, a longitudinal mixed-methods study pairing student perceptions with classroom observations and teacher self-reports could triangulate how specific communication elements (e.g., tone, nonverbal cues) correlate with behavioral and academic outcomes,

while evaluating targeted professional development in relational strategies would test their impact on classroom practice and student well-being.

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