

The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

## Non-auditory Effects of Noise in the Classroom: Students

Published September 7th, 2022

Pam Millett, PhD, Reg CASLPO

Editor's Note: This article is a continuation from the previous column in issue #4 of CanadianAudiologist.ca, but this time around, concentrating on the non-auditory effects of noise in the classroom for students, rather than for teachers.



In the June issue, I talked about non-auditory effects of noise on teachers, specifically on teacher

vocal health and absenteeism. There is no question that students are also impacted by high external and internal noise levels. The topic was first raised in the 1950s and 60s, and research has continued to demonstrate the same adverse effects of noise on academic performance; in fact, there is so much research on the adverse effects of noise on students that I gave up trying to cite it all. Arline Bronzaft's fascinating work in the 1970s and 1980s comparing the academic performance of students on two different sides of the same school (one side with high environmental noise levels and one without) could not have been clearer (Bronzaft & McCarthy, 1975); in fact, a follow-up study in which noise reduction strategies were applied outside (to the rail track) and inside, equalized the reading scores on the two sides of the school (Bronzaft, 1981). There is comprehensive research literature on the effects of noise on speech perception for a variety of student groups which has not changed over the years (e.g., younger children, English Language Learners, students with mild or unilateral hearing loss, students with auditory processing disorders and other learning challenges) (Crandell & Smaldino, 1996; Klatte et al., 2013; Neuman et al., 2010; Nober, 1973; Ziegler et al., 2009). Students themselves understand that noise is a problem. Connolly et al. (2015) surveyed 11-16-year-old students on their perceptions of their classrooms' acoustical conditions, and the results aligned perfectly with the research on speech perception in noise. Students with mild hearing loss, English Language learners, and learning challenges reported being significantly more affected by poor classroom acoustics than their peers, indicating that students can reliably evaluate and report on difficulty listening in poor acoustical conditions. Internal and external noise has been shown to have an impact on a wide variety of student issues stress levels (Evans et al., 2001), reports of annoyance (van Kempen et al., 2010); incidence of student behaviour problems (Lim et al., 2018) and possibly mental health, although the research in this area is mixed (Crombie et al., 2011; Haines et al., 2001; Park et al., 2017; Stansfeld et al., 2009).

The research on sound field or Classroom Audio Distribution Systems (CADS) clearly shows that speech understanding and academic performance are improved with their use. Audiologists, speech-language pathologists, teachers, and students understand that classroom noise is a problem. Professional associations (Speech-Language and Audiology Canada, the American Academy of Audiology, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, the Acoustical Society of America, ASHA) have published position statements advocating for better acoustical design and implementation of sound field systems universally in classrooms and professional and consumer group organizations such as the Classroom Acoustics Coalition, Quiet Communities Inc., the School Noise Action Group are also advocating for change. So why is noise still a problem? I can clearly recall sitting in a staff room at a completely open concept school, listening to teachers discuss their plans to request transfers to different schools specifically because of the noise levels in the school and their envy of those who had managed to escape teaching there. This is the same school where I repeatedly asked the Plant Department to conduct some sound level measurements, hoping they might help partner in advocating for change. Someone finally did and told me they didn't see a problem. It turned out that the individual had done the measurements on a professional development day when there were no students in the school and no classes going on because, in their words, "it's easier to do the measurements when no kids are running around." We know the problem and the strategies to address it; we don't particularly need more research on this. However, how do we convince administrators, Ministries of Education, and governments that this is a big enough problem to spend money on to fix? Email me if you know the answer.

## References

- 1. Bronzaft, A. L. (1981). The effect of a noise abatement program on reading ability. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *1*(3), 215-222.
- 2. Bronzaft, A. L., & McCarthy, D. P. (1975). The effect of elevated train noise on reading ability. *Environment and Behavior*, 7(4), 517-528.
- 3. Evans G., Lercher, P., Meis, M., Ising, H., & Kofler, W. (2001) Community noise exposure and stress in children. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America.*, *109*(3), 1023–7.
- 4. Connolly, D. M., Dockrell, J. E., Shield, B. M., Conetta, R., & Cox, T. J. (2015). Students' perceptions of school acoustics and the impact of noise on teaching and learning in secondary schools: Findings of a questionnaire survey. *Energy Procedia*, 78, 3114-3119.
- 5. Crandell, C. C., and Smaldino, J. J. (1996). Speech perception in noise by children for whom English is a second language. *American Journal of Audiology*, *5*, 47–51.
- 6. Crombie, R., Clark, C., & Stansfeld, S. (2011). Environmental noise exposure, early biological risk and mental health in nine to ten year old children: A cross-sectional field study. *Environmental Health*, 10:39.
- Evans, G. W., Lercher, P., Meis, M., Ising, H., & Kofler, W. W. (2001). Community noise exposure and stress in children. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 109(3), 1023-1027.
- Haines, M., Stansfeld, S., Job, R., Berglund, B., & Head, J. (2001). Chronic aircraft noise exposure, stress responses, mental health and cognitive performance in school children. *Psychol Med.*, *31*, 265–77.
- 9. Klatte, M., Bergström, K., & Lachmann, T. (2013). Does noise affect learning? A short review on noise effects on cognitive performance in children. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*, 578.
- 10. Lim, J., Kweon, K., Kim, H.W., Cho, S.W., Park, J., & Sim, C.S. (2018). Negative impact of noise and noise sensitivity on mental health in childhood. *Noise Health*, *20*(96), 199-211.
- 11. Park, J., Chung, S., Lee, J., Sung, J. H., Cho, S. W., & Sim, C. S. (2017). Noise sensitivity, rather than noise level, predicts the non-auditory effects of noise in community samples: a population-based survey. *BMC Public Health*, *17*(1), 1-9.
- 12. Stansfeld, S., Clark, C., Cameron, R.M., Alfred, T., Head, J., & Haines, M.M. (2009). Aircraft and road traffic noise exposure and children's mental health. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *29*, 203–7.
- 13. van Kempen, E., van Kamp, I., Nilsson, M., Lammers, J., Emmen, H., & Clark, C. (2010). The role of annoyance in the relation between transportation noise and children's health and cognition. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, *128*, 2817–28.
- 14. Ziegler, J. C., Pech-Georgel, C., George, F., and Lorenzi, C. (2009). Speech-perception-in-noise deficits in dyslexia. *Developmental Science*, *12*, 732–745.