



Students' Perspectives of School Suspension

Background

Over recent years there have been rising suspension rates both within primary and high schools throughout Australia. Some research has been undertaken on this topic, however little of it seems to address the issue from the point of view of the child. Moreover, the small number of research studies that exist come primarily from the United Kingdom and United States of America; few if any studies have been conducted within Australia. This paper will highlight the general findings from current literature on student perspectives on school suspension. The data primarily comes from ten articles published between 1987 and 2008. Themes of the articles include: the need for stronger relationships between teachers and their students; that suspension does little to address the underlying causes of challenging behaviours; and the need for further research into the child's view and own experiences of suspension.

Teachers have a strong influence in many ways over their students, and this in turn provides us with a clear link between children's challenging behaviours at schools and their relationships with adults and teachers. Most of the literature found (McCluskey 2008, Bru et al. 2002, Osler 2000, Benjamin et al. 2003) cites the extent to which a teacher is able to influence students, in both academic and personal ways. According to Bru et al (2002), the stronger the bond between a child and their teacher, the more likely the person will consider acting in an acquiescent manner, which is likely to have a strong preventative effect on deviant behaviour. In addition, findings from research on children's perspectives indicate that students who "feel emotionally supported by their teachers are more likely to experience enjoyment of learning and motivation for academic success and to display on-task

behaviours" (Bru et al. 2002, p289). Furthermore, positive relationships with a teacher have been associated with better than expected or improved outcomes with children who are considered to be at-risk of exclusion. For example, misbehaviour and suspension rates had significantly lessened (ibid). Children were also seen as speaking of teachers who were fair and who respected young people, with higher regard (McCluskey, 2008).

Another theme which repeatedly occurred throughout literature on student perspectives of school suspension was that the process of suspension, and the suspension itself did little to address the underlying causes of students' challenging behaviours. Whilst some schools were found to have a few programs, like counselling, in place to support the child and their family, it seemed from the literature (Brown, 2007; Munn, 2005; Costenbader, 1998; Osler, 2000) that more often than not, suspension was one of the only forms of punishment that was repeatedly used. Considering that most children who were acting out at school seemed to have a reason or explanation for their misbehaviour (whether a family matter or a personal and emotional problem), suspension on its own seemed an inadequate form of a long term solution. As Munn (2005) points out "many of the young people interviewed valued school but their current circumstances were grim...many of the pupils had parents who were addicted to drugs, or witnessed or experienced domestic violence, or otherwise lived very stressful lives." (p215).

Until now most of the research that has been conducted in this area focuses on a particular form of exclusion, whether it be in-school suspension (Johnston, 1987 & Costenbader, 1998), short or long term suspensions (Gersch, 1994), as well as permanent exclusion (Brown, 2007 & Pomeroy, 2000). None of the studies

incorporate an exploration of all types of exclusion nor compare and analyse the positive versus negative impacts on children when addressing challenging behaviours in such ways. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the main methods of data collection are qualitative in nature and use ethnographic approaches (Brown, 2007). Semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used method for obtaining information (Gersch, 1994 & Munn, 2005). There were also some studies which incorporated focus groups and questionnaires (McCluskey, 2008, & Osler, 2000), and others who used surveys (Costenbader, 1998) on a large scale to analyse children's views on school suspension.

Finally, it is safe to argue that most of the literature cited, both old and recent, contends that more research should be done into children's perspectives of suspension. Gersch (1994) argues that more studies should be explored to elicit the child's views of suspension in order to truly understand the effects of exclusion, as the child is the primary source of this knowledge. Pomeroy (2000) further supports this argument by pointing to the number of valuable insights gained through her exploration into the views of excluded students.

Reference List

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