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Student suspensions: The influence on students and their parents

**Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association
for Research in Education, Brisbane 30 Nov-4 Dec, 1997**

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PARTG97.326

In this study, secondary school students in Years 8-10 who were suspended from school were interviewed during their suspension to obtain their views on the validity, efficacy and consequences of suspension as a strategy in behaviour management. Also, their parents were interviewed for their views on the effect of the suspension on the family and on the student. Students were penalised with periods of suspension from two to 10 days, and these suspensions were supposed to be spent in the care of the parents. The actual operation of these out-of-school suspensions depended upon the parents: in some cases students were allowed to roam free; in others they were grounded. The findings indicate mixed consequences of suspension depending upon the context in which it occurs and the characteristics of the student. The study suggests that student responses reflect the extent to which they accept the authority of the school, with more resistant students being less submissive. Their responses also relate to the perceptions of their care givers, with more resistant students coming from families where the school is viewed negatively. Alternative strategies to suspension might be more effective for the target students as suspension did little to improve behaviour or performance.

Introduction

Following the abolition of corporal punishment in State schools in the mid-1980s, the use of suspensions as a form of management was formalised (Louden, 1985). Research into the use of this strategy for student control before the introduction of the system showed an upward trend in suspensions for the period 1981-83, with 261 suspensions in 1981, 412 in 1982 and 450 predicted for 1983 (Hyde & Robson, 1984). This growth has continued, with over 2500 suspensions in 1993. Apart from a study by Gardiner, Evans and Howell (1995) into the suspension of Aboriginal students in Western Australia, there has been no recent research into the process, and there has been no research into its effectiveness.

Suspensions are regarded as a penultimate solution to the management of student behaviour, with the final step being exclusion. Suspension is defined as follows:

Suspension is a legal process of preventing students from attending school for a limited period of time if their behaviour and conduct is not conducive to the good order and proper

management of the school. Suspension can serve multiple purposes. These purposes include a cooling off period, discipline, the protection of the individual or school, to act as a deterrent, to allow students the opportunity to reassess their attitude/behaviour in relation to the school community, and to involve parent(s)/care-giver(s). (Education Department of Western Australia, 1996, p. 1)

The mechanism for suspension must be organised within a formal policy for behaviour management in the school. Under existing policy, principals can suspend students for up to 30 days, after which time exclusion is considered by a panel. A similarly organised panel reviews student suspensions after 15 days suspension or four periods of suspension, whichever is less. The length of each suspension depends upon the severity of the offence, with a minor suspension being two days, and a longer suspension (such as for fighting) may be ten days.

The actual suspension from school is only part of the procedure which, according to the manuals on the school suspension policy issued to the teachers, is supposed to start with meaningful glances, warnings by the teacher, isolation in and out of class, behaviour contracts and in-school suspensions, in keeping with the underlying philosophy of the system, based on Glasser (1969). The strength of the approach in Western Australian schools lies in the coordinated approach by whole school staffs (Burden, 1992). On their return to school students should receive counselling regarding their misbehaviour and their future behaviour.

While serious offenders are a minority in schools, the generally accepted management behaviours of teachers engender fear and negative attitudes in students, distract them from their work and may promote sympathy for the miscreants (Lewis & Lovegrove, 1987). The teacher behaviours preferred by students include calmness, rule clarity and reasonableness [of rules], appropriate punishments, fairness and acceptance of responsibility [for maintaining discipline] (Lewis & Lovegrove, 1984).

Aboriginal students who consider that the discipline administered by teachers is unfair experience considerable anger and frustration (Partington, Waugh, & Forrest, 1995). The teachers acknowledge that this is the case, but their major concern is the effect of disruptive behaviour on the other 20-30 students in class. Even so, the evidence of Lewis and Lovegrove (1987, 1984) indicates that even with this consideration, it is possible for teachers to behave in ways that students find acceptable.

Slee (1992) pointed out that discipline can no longer be used as a euphemism for punishment, and schools need to move from a position of negative reinforcement to positive incentive. To do this, however, they need to know what incentives attract students. The prevailing policies in operation in schools at the official level ignore the influence of external factors and focus on the behaviour, attempting to address that in isolation from influences on it. However, such an approach is unlikely to succeed in the long run because the students do not operate in a vacuum: their lives are influenced by their environments, and external influences create tensions and stresses which can lead to disruption in class. Furthermore, teachers are similarly influenced by factors other than the immediate situation before them (Partington et al., 1995) and escalation can occur so that a simple act of misbehaviour becomes a serious offence.

Giroux (, 1992) observed the significance of context in the lives of students, and argued that it is not possible to compartmentalise either their lives or the lives of teachers. Current behaviour management policies endeavour to do this, however, and it is likely that the consequences are the increasing rates of suspensions, dropping out of school by the students most influenced by their negative contexts, and greater anger and anxiety among students and stress among teachers. It is possible that behaviour management contributes to student disliking for school: According to a report on alienation in a regional community in Western Australia (Geraldton Regional Community Education Centre, 1995), only one third of students expressed a liking for school. Another third didn't like school, and the remainder

were uncertain. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relevance of context in student suspensions with particular attention to the out-of-school context, and the extent to which students who have been suspended and their parents were satisfied with the procedures adopted.

Method

The research is based on interviews with suspended students, their parents and teachers in two State high schools in Western Australia. Both schools had approximately 650 students. In both, there was a significant minority of Indigenous students. Interviews were conducted with students when they were under suspension or immediately following their return to school. Parents were interviewed at the same time. Also, school staff were interviewed for information on the nature of the suspension and background on the student. Students were selected by nomination by parents in one school, and by selection by one of the teachers in the other. A semi-structured interview schedule guided the investigation. Interviews were conducted either at the school or at the home of the students.

A total of 15 suspensions were investigated. Although categorisation of the reasons for suspension is difficult as many involved complex interactions between the student and the teachers, in general terms, six were for swearing, five for fighting, one for threatening the teacher, two for refusing a teacher's directive and one for throwing a chair.

Suspension as an effective measure

School personnel regarded suspension as an effective measure for stabilising a situation. In cases where students had altercations with teachers or other students, the opportunity to suspend them allowed a cooling off period during which they could consider the nature of their actions and see the error of their ways. It also was felt to be a method of demonstrating to the parent or guardian the seriousness with which the school regarded the behaviour that led to the suspension.

The effectiveness of suspensions as a means of disciplining students, however, depended upon the nature of the incidents that led to the suspension, the motivations and attitudes of the students and the parental response. For some students, suspensions were a shameful experience, particularly students who were unaccustomed to them but for other students, being suspended was just another plank on the path to exclusion. Resentment at being suspended was a characteristic of some students.

Few of the parents thought suspensions were desirable. Although one school principal considered that this was because it disrupted their work as they had to remain home to care for their child, this was not a major concern for most parents. All considered that there needed to be more support for the students. Despite the intentions of the State policy on suspensions, few students received effective counselling on their return to school.

I: So the deputy, what did he say to you?

Eva: He just told me what happened and said that he wasn't going to put up with that sort of behaviour in the school, which I can understand, because I mean I won't put up with it here, so I mean I can see his point, but the thing is there's got to be more, there's just not enough. I mean they get suspended, they go back to school and that seems to be the end of it, so she got suspended twice in three weeks. I: What would you like to see?

Eva: I think there's got to be some sort of counselling or something there, or I don't know, there's got to be something more, I mean even sending work home with them while they're suspended, make them do their work at home, I mean that surely has to be an option because she's losing out, I'm losing out and she's home to annoy me and doing nothing, which I mean, I guess they're thinking is, ok you just go home, been suspended you think

about what you've done to them, over the next four days, but what else is there, there's nothing. Throughout the interviews, two key issues occupied the parents: the loss of instruction and the need to redirect their children so they no longer offended at school. Several parents could see quite clearly that their children were heading down a path that led to exclusion and failure in later life and this was a grave concern. From the students' perspectives, suspension was seen in a variety of lights. For some, it was a convenient legal way of being at home; for others, it was a frustrating experience, marking their powerlessness in the face of the authorities, and for others, it was embarrassing. Two of the students were on 27 days' suspension and so one more suspension could see them being excluded from school. One student was concerned about this, but the other was untroubled: he saw it as an opportunity to transfer to an out-of-school program for persistent offenders. Many of his offences were for swearing, which he used to escape from class:

Gary: That's the only way of getting out of it, you know if you say the wrong thing to them you can get out, that's it, you'll never be back in that class. Before Miss Davis over there, our Science teacher, me and John, one lesson, we was mucking up, she told us to get out the class, she doesn't even let us in there no more, cause we mucked up. It can be argued that these are the worst offenders and the system is functioning effectively because the large majority of students behave themselves, don't get suspended and attend school regularly. Students such as Gary are chronic offenders who are uncontrollable in class, don't like school and are a disruption to the learning of other students and the operation of the system will eventually remove them to the benefit of the rest of the school.

However, most students who received multiple suspensions indicated that other students did not receive the same treatment:

Gary: [The teacher] goes, 'Pick up the pens and put the pens on the desk', and she goes, pass I said, 'You've got arms and legs, get 'em yourself', then she goes, 'Go to the office'. I got to the office [and] he told me to go to the Contract Room for the whole day. All I said was, you pick them up yourself, [A girl] in Year 10, she picked up a chair and physically threw it at the teacher and she didn't get suspended. Peter Johnson, he swore at a teacher, he didn't get suspended, only people like me and Phillip Patten and Norm. This lack of consistency, observed by several of the students, can be explained in terms of the context of the events. Students who are perceived as chronic offenders are a threat to the teachers, who cannot afford to allow them to continue their misbehaviour for fear of disrupting the rest of the class (Partington et al., 1995). Once embarked upon a career as an offender, however, such students find they cannot redeem themselves.

The Students at Home

Rita: Out of school, he's normally the most placid, well mannered, wonderful child you could come across I could say, someone feed the cat, someone take the rubbish out, someone put the bin out and you guarantee Bob would go and do it. The other two would just sit until you say, get moving and do it, whereas Bob will just, he hops off and he's really good like that, always has been.

With one or two exceptions, most parents described their children in endearing terms. Relationships in most homes appeared to be cordial with the children being helpful, participating in household chores, being intelligent, lively and positive.

For some of the non-Indigenous students, family breakup may have been significant in their misbehaviour. The departure of Bob Tang's father, followed by a severe beating at school, were considered by his mother to be key factors in his behaviour at school:

Rita: We've had a lot happen in the last twelve months that I think has made a big impact on him, as far as the people he's hanging out with. I don't know if you know, my husband and I, well he took off twelve months ago with someone else and has had very little contact with the kids, still to this day. I mean in January he had contact and he's only recently contacted

them again. In between that time Bob was taken out of the school boundaries by boys with screwdrivers and beaten up in the school grounds by these same children to the extent where we've had to get restraining orders put on the kids because they really did hassle him which made Bob turn to a lot of the Aboriginal children in the school as his mates because I think he feels protected and he was good and scared, but these kids aren't noted for being good kids and he's really changed, he's turned around.

This parent was called to the school earlier in the year to collect Bob when he was 'running amok' around the school as a consequence of refusing to go to contract room because he believed he was not in the wrong. Coincidentally, his father had moved with his new partner from Perth to a coastal town and his older brother went to live with them. Rita: The oldest boy left me and went to live with his dad and Bob had broken up so, absolutely broke his heart Although several of the students in this study came from separated families, not all students appeared to be influenced by such relationship difficulties. Even so, Tattum's observation is pertinent here:

Children arrive at school with different attitudes, expectations and behaviour patterns; but recent research recognises that schools are very different in their policies and practices, and that some, rather than support pupils who arrive with personal problems and difficulties, actually contribute to their difficulties and exacerbate the pupil's problems. Conversely, there are schools which provide a supportive atmosphere for their pupils which is conducive to good behaviour and academic success. (Tattum, 1984, p. 94)

Most of the parents were very concerned about their children's behaviour at school. A number had close links with the school and regularly discussed the progress of their child in one case, each week. These parents were able to influence the school's handling of their child much more effectively than the parents who had little to do with the school. It may be that a lighter penalty, noted for one boy by another who had been suspended for a similar offence, were a consequence of the former boy's father maintaining a dialogue with the deputy principal over the behaviour of the student. This reflects the greater resources, and their more effective use, among some families compared with others. (Collins & Thompson, 1997)

Interaction in the Classroom

Rose: I feel like, when you are teaching adolescent kids you really should be better equipped to deal with these situations in a least confrontational manner. It was very confrontational I would say, his behaviour and actually I mean he ended up throwing Victor's work in the bin and you know, isn't the best way to handle that sort of situation. Victor had been suspended for three days for refusing a teacher directive. However, preceding this was an earlier refusal during a class when the teacher directed him to remove a shirt which didn't conform to school dress code. He refused and was given scab duty (picking up rubbish in the yard). In the next class with that teacher, the senior teacher for the subject took him to another room and 'busted' him. Victor: I was frustrated with him because that was something that had nothing to do with him, apart from the same department. So I just thought why should he be involved and I was sort of angry with myself for going off and I was wondering what had happened to me. I asked him why he was busting me for something I did in another class and I didn't think I got an answer to that and so I just started going off at him and I walked out of the room.

I: When you say 'going off' what, swearing or Victor: Yes, I swore at him in a very loud voice. I: Why?

Victor: Well, I was so frustrated.

Robinson (1992, p. 278) reported results by Beynon (1989) who found that

'Hegemonic masculinity' was reinforced through coercive and severe authoritarian discipline measures, usually associated with male teachers. Regularly, sheer physical terror was part of the technique employed by headteachers to achieve their disciplinary goals. Certainly, the experiences of Victor would fit into this description. The action of the senior teacher in taking him aside and intimidating him was quite contrary to the school's Managing Student Behaviour policy, which stated, 'This [policy] provides a non-confrontational strategy, and avoids the effects of a punitive system'. Appropriate procedures were not followed and Victor's subsequent actions escalated the event from an isolation room detention to the three day suspension. It would appear that normal detention in which Victor could have reflected on his behaviour would have been quite sufficient. A number of students experienced confrontations with teachers which made them angry and resulted in them swearing at the teacher. Swearing breaks down the formal relationship between the teacher and the students and demonstrates that the students no longer perceive the teacher as higher in status and deserving more respect than them. Although responsibility for swearing rests largely with the students who respond inappropriately in the situation, it is easy to envisage alternative ways of handling the situation so that student dignity was maintained.

Karen Brown, for example, attended school without the correct uniform because her clothes were in the wash. According to the school rules, she had to obtain a 'dress code' which was a form noting her inappropriate attire, which consisted of a rather expensive track suit top. A teacher stopped her in the corridor and asked if she had a dress code. Even though it was confirmed that she did, the teacher criticised Karen for her dress:

Karen: [The teacher said] 'You can afford to wear these clothes and you can't even afford to buy a blue scrappy old jumper' and I said, 'I didn't want to buy one' and she said, 'Well my kids don't even get these clothes and you can afford them'. And I said 'Well'. And then I asked her for my slip back and then she gave it back to me, then while she was saying something and then I accidentally swore at her. Once again, a confrontational situation occurred, initiated by the teacher and contrary to the school policy. After all, Karen had gone through the correct channels to obtain a dress code which enabled her to wear clothing which didn't conform.

The organisation of secondary schools is founded on an assumption of student conformity to a common set of attitudes, behaviours and prior experiences. For those who come from homes which are stable, inculcate the same values as are represented in the school, have parental support, and are able to relate well to other students, there are relatively few problems. Students who are different have a much more difficult time with school discipline because it makes no concessions for student problems. For several reasons teachers are not in a position to make such concessions. First, they do not know the circumstances surrounding the students' lives, and are not in a position to judge the appropriateness of modifications to the disciplinary code. Second, to make concessions on such grounds for one student would necessitate making concessions for other students on equivalent grounds. Third, a climate of acceptance and trust would be needed for such a situation to develop, and, except in exceptional circumstances, teachers have neither the counselling skills nor the access to the privileged information necessary to implement such a way of operating.

Foucault (1991) developed the concept of 'docile bodies' to explain the way in which authorities, by regarding the body as an object, manipulated it to conform to a standard.

Normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age. For the marks that once indicated status, privilege and affiliation were increasingly replaced or at least supplemented by a whole range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogeneous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank. In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another.

(Foucault, 1991, p. 184) The school system demonstrates structural bias against students who refuse, or are unable, to be normalised. It is still functioning as it did in the 19th century on an industrial model. Students are objectified and treated as parts of the system rather than individuals with expectations, needs and beliefs that distinguish them from one another. The discrimination is against those students who are not advantaged by parental background to be prepared for school.

Violence

The Education Department of Western Australia (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995a) defined violence as 'Any action physical, verbal, sexual or psychological used against a person that is injurious, unjust or unwarranted'. Jenkin (1996) views the elimination of violence through the development of self-control as a guarantee of our own safety. Only a minority of the population is violent, and Jenkin observes that those who commit violent acts do so from choice:

In the final analysis, there is a moment in time when the individual chooses violence over all other options as a means of resolution to a problem or situation. Irrespective of the cultural milieu, the family or other circumstances of the conflict, and having regard for the limited repertoire of alternative behaviours violent individuals may have to draw on, the violent act is a selective response. (Jenkin, 1996, p. 234)

Jenkin is incorrect, however, in arguing that the reason some individuals choose violence is a question for psychiatry. This might be the case in a cultural milieu in which violence is an aberration. For many Australians, however, violence is a part of the daily routine of life and is regarded as an appropriate method of resolving issues.

Malin (, 1989) for example, found socialisation of Indigenous children incorporated a belief in the efficacy of fighting to resolve problems and this may be reflected in the over representation of Indigenous students in trouble at school. It may also be a characteristic of many lower socio-economic status families. This is a social, rather than a psychological, issue, however. While there will be some students who are individually pathological regarding violence, it is likely that the majority of violent acts are committed as a consequence of being socialised into a belief that resolving conflicts violently is socially acceptable. Tattum (1984, p. 98) argued that

Pupil behaviour can be regarded as a preservation of self in response to a daily onslaught on their identity. In their efforts to preserve their self-image in an institution which regularly subjects them to negative definitions and degrading experiences, many of the youngsters responded with similar abuse and violence.

The school is a site for the conflict of value systems and for the public subjection of students to the authority of the teachers. As Tattum notes, the way in which this authority is exercised to control students is publicly humiliating and offensive to the students who are alert to the denigration to which they are being subjected. One perceptive student contrasted the treatment she received from a relief teacher with the kind of treatment she received at home:

Janet: That teacher had no right to say that to me, 'cos all I was doing was asking for a pen, for Christ's sake. (Interjection from mother: Oh, Janet!). If I say, 'Oh, mum, I'm going out to have a drink of water now', would you go, 'Go to your room and stay there for an hour!' Would ya? You see, that teacher, she was just telling people off for no reason, and I just happened to be the student that was at a boiling point. See, if it wasn't me it would have been someone else. Janet's response was to tell the teacher to 'get f'd'. As she said, 'I was sitting there and I was going, 'Oh, I didn't even do anything' and like everyone in the classroom was like stunned 'cos I was getting busted for no reason'.

If we were to attribute such behaviour to individual pathological behaviours, it would leave the institution free of any responsibility for the construction of situations in which students are pushed beyond their limits. Teachers must share responsibility for the construction of students as troublemakers through the system that operates. As long as only one structure of schooling exists, students will continue to display such behaviours.

Fighting

Of all the misbehaviours in school, fighting is probably the most clear cut behaviour deserving suspension. Five of the students in the present study who were suspended had been fighting. Fighting is inappropriate in the context of the school and threatens the social fabric of the institution. It is the behaviour which most clearly demonstrates the potential for anarchy in the school if the teachers lost control. Considerable school resources are devoted to the repression of violence, and when it occurs it is dealt with severely. In the schools investigated, fighting attracted the longest suspensions, one school awarding a maximum ten day suspensions and the other regularly awarded five. Interestingly, the first school was in a lower socioeconomic status area, and so violence, being an attribute more of lower status groups, was more of a problem. The need to maintain a check on it in the that school apparently resulted in more severe penalties which would have led to the early removal of violent students: because 30 days' suspension leads to exclusion, a student need be caught fighting only three times and he or she could be excluded. Three of the six Aboriginal students in the study were suspended for fighting (two of the other three were suspended for swearing). In the case of Kevin, teasing by two girls against his best friend led Kevin to retaliate by kicking one of the girls in the back. The girls were 'talking dirty to my friends' about 'her and another friend saying that they want to have sex with him'. Kevin reported that his friend didn't want them so he stuck up for him, and would do it again if it happened. There was a sense of justice in what he did: Kevin considered that it was not fair that he had been suspended because 'she was the one that brought it onto herself' as though the kick was inevitable natural justice.

Swearing

Swearing is encompassed in the definition of violence in the Education Department of Western Australia's (, 1995b) . policy on managing student behaviour Six students were suspended for swearing. In most cases the swearing was associated with anger directed either at the teacher or another student. In one case which involved the use of swearwords in an illustrative way in a joke the student was telling his friends, it was the subsequent escalation of the incident that resulted in suspension. Bob: He told me to go up to the front office and told Mr Pallas straight and Mr Pallas goes right, you've got Contract, and I goes, I don't deserve Contract and then we argued for a little while and then I refused to go to Contract and then he goes, right, I'm ringing your mum up to come and pick you up and you're suspended for three days and got Contract as soon as you come back.

In this case the student expressed shame at having been directed to the contract room for swearing. Despite this, he had had a previous contract for swearing in the presence of a teacher. The other five cases involved swearing as a consequence of anger. Swearing is included in the definition of violence in the Education Department's behaviour management policy. The way in which swearing was used by the students indicated that this may have been appropriate: although verbal, the language used was delivered expressively and colourfully, leaving the teacher in no doubt as to the student's feelings.

Clearly, there were elements in each of the swearing cases that were common. Frustration on the part of the student at not being given freedom of choice was principal among these. In the case of Janet, a combination of factors contributed to her suspension, but the trigger which resulted in swearing was the teacher's dictate:

Janet: I went [home] to get my key and there was only about five minutes left for the class, so I didn't think it was worth going back, so I see my friend crying, she came running down the corridor crying and [went in] the toilet and I was going to go in that toilet anyway and then I went in there and asked why she was crying and that and then the teacher came in and told her to go back to her class and all that and she [the teacher] just asked why I was there. I just said I was going to the toilet and she wanted me to go to class and I said no, I won't go, I'm leaving 'cos there was no use going back to class so then I swore.

I: How was she talking to you?

Janet: She was rude.

I: So what did she say?

Janet: She just goes, 'Go the office, go and get a late note' and I said, 'Oh, my friend's crying in the toilet' and then she just started going off.

So she swore at the teacher in frustration at not being able to maintain a course of action she believed was right: the care of her friend who was distressed. This was quite coincidental, of course. If the other student hadn't come along, she wouldn't have stopped to console her; the fact that the other student left the class in distress caused the male teacher to request a passing female teacher to go and see if she was alright; that teacher found Janet in the toilet, which was against the school rules.

School functions on different social rules from family or community. At home, few children are subjected to rigid authority from their parents, and relationships are much more egalitarian than a generation ago. Even the workplace, in most cases, has changed since the rigid authoritarianism of the industrial age, as described by Foucault (1991). Secondary schools, however, continue to demand obedience to a questionable authority. They operate as hierarchical institutions in which the teacher dominates the students. The assumption of authority by teachers in high schools is a tenuous claim today. The neighbourhood in which the school is located is very different from the picture of former ages:

Joan: Around these neighbourhoods you can walk down to the local shop and along the journey you will find a two year old that's going to tell you right where to get off, so to me it seems like its become common language around here which doesn't help situations at all either and because its become such a common language those teenagers are using it in every day sense, but they know that as soon as they aim it at the teacher, holiday time and that's all they do.

Perceptions of Powerlessness

An interesting phenomenon in two of the incidents was the retrospective violence that led to suspensions. These students claimed to be innocent when the teacher accused them of infringing the rules, and when it appeared that their protestations were falling on deaf ears, they carried out violent acts to confirm the teachers' accusations. In both cases it appeared that they believed that they were powerless to prevent the accusations resulting in disciplinary acts against them and so might as well commit an offence that warranted the already awarded discipline. This is the same motivation that led Kevin to take the law into his own hands and administer natural justice to the girl who offended his friend.

Failure to respond to the concerns of students exacerbates discipline issues and leads to escalation. Partington, Waugh and Forrest (1995) found that teachers were partly responsible for escalation in about half of the discipline problems studied, and largely responsible for one quarter of the cases. In the present study, escalation of minor problems into events warranting suspension also occurred as a consequence of teachers ignoring the students' concerns. This happens most often among students who have acquired a record of misbehaviour. When students develop a reputation, teachers appear to ignore their arguments, preferring to operate on their own prejudices about the student.

Norm Foster, a Year 8 student from a lower socio-economic area, was suspended when he swore at a teacher. He had been sent to a buddy teacher for talking in class and when he returned to class at the end of the period his bag was missing.

I: What did you say to the teacher?

Norm: She just said, Oh, stuff your bag. Go and sit down. So I just said something back to her.

I: What did you say?

Norm: I said you can get f'd. I'm going to look for my bag. I just took off. It was the end of the day.

On the following day, Norm was placed on contract for swearing. He didn't think that was fair because all that had happened is that he asked the teacher where his bag was. So he went home. When he returned to school on the following day he was given three days' suspension. One can sympathise with the teacher for failing to listen to Norm's demands regarding the whereabouts of his bag. It is likely he asked in such a way that offended the teacher who responded negatively. What comes through clearly, however, is his sense of justice: the loss of his bag and the failure of the teacher to respond to his demand for it annulled all his subsequent behaviour.

Norm had a reputation in the school and so it might be that teachers set up barriers to his demands. Furthermore, his manner was abrupt and challenging in the interview, so it is likely that he behaved in a similar manner to the teacher. Rather than being courteous and polite behaviours which would have been approved Norm was short with the teacher. This contrary behaviour can be related to the behaviour noted by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, The feeling of injustice that a prisoner has is one of the causes that may make his character untameable. When he sees himself exposed in this way to suffering, which the law has neither ordered nor envisaged, he becomes habitually angry against everything around him; he sees every agent of authority as an executioner; he no longer thinks that he was guilty; he accuses justice itself. (Bigot Preameneu in Foucault, 1991, p. 266) Norm's problems were not helped by the events which took place around him in the school, but out of school a different picture was painted by his mother. She was aware of the consequences of getting a reputation:

Mrs. Foster: A lot of the teachers can't be bothered and they'll just say, 'Oh, well, the kid's a trouble maker anyhow, you know, and it's not a problem. If he's been in trouble prior, well then you get a name for yourself or you get pinpointed as being the problem. [Teachers] think well, every other time you've caused trouble so then I'm not going to listen to you. I'm not interested in what you've got to say, just, out.

Norm's reputation preceded him because his brothers had been to the same school and were well known for their misbehaviour. According to his mother, he arrived a couple of weeks late to school and received no support to catch up, particularly in mathematics, a subject which he had done well in primary school. As a consequence, he played up in that subject and was frequently sent out for behaviour problems. Mrs. Foster described a boy who had been in considerable trouble in the past but was making a determined effort to improve himself. He was participating in kick boxing and was keen to behave in order to keep the approval of the instructor, whom he admired. Thus he was trying to behave better in school, but, as he said to his mother, 'I'm trying but they're not noticing'.

Mrs. Foster was unwilling to go to the school because 'every time I confront him [the deputy principal] we just don't come to any agreement, I just don't agree with his methods'. This lack of communication prevented the school from being informed of Norm's changed attitude. This is in marked contrast to some other parents who maintained close links with

the school. These parents appeared more at ease with the staff, one referring to the deputy principal by first name. In contrast, other parents of students in trouble didn't even know his name, such was their lack of contact with the school.

Solutions

Only a minority of students are suspended each year, yet it is clear that at least some of these believe that there is no real justice at school so take matters into their own hands. Compounding this situation is the apparent bias in the system, as evidenced by the differential treatment of students.

Schools can adopt a pragmatic view on the incidence of suspensions and ignore the regular, but small, occurrence of unjustified suspensions. This, however, is quite contrary to the school policies which espouse equity, fairness and communication. In contrast, the practices employed by some teachers engender fear, distrust and frustration. These are not good emotions to be carrying while attempting to learn, while the potential for confrontation in less than hegemonic conditions often results in escalation of minor incidents to bring about suspension. Parents recommended a number of solutions to the problems they perceived in suspensions. Chief among these was the need to ensure their children maintained their learning. The recommendation that suspension be carried out in a school supervised environment during which time students engage in productive work is a sound approach. If this was to take up some of their own time, it is likely that students would be more apprehensive about getting suspended, particularly if they were keen to get out of school, as Gary Benson was. Many behaviour management strategies have been implemented in schools, but these often are based on an individual pathology model in which the student is seen to have a psychological problem that needs remedying. Swearing, however, is a socially accepted phenomenon among some groups, rather than an individual psychological problem. The fact that one student was suspended for swearing while telling a joke points to the difficulty of arguing the pathology model. It is likely that the majority of teachers, particularly males, swear as a matter of course outside school. Increasingly, courts of law are refusing to convict citizens tried for obscene language charges; perhaps it is time the schools caught up. It would be more appropriate to teach students to use alternative terms. The English language is replete with a breadth of terms which can be used to express feelings. In one school in Western Australia, a program to instruct Indigenous students to 'Use the alternative word' has successfully changed student language to reduce the incidence of swearing.

Perhaps the major change within the existing structure is the implementation of more pastoral care at the classroom level. The better performance of primary schools in handling student discipline was noted by parents, although changes in students as a result of the onset of adolescence affects high school discipline. Even so, the structure of the primary school is better suited to a pastoral care model, and secondary schools should move to a model in which a small group of teachers is responsible for a group of students over an extended period of time. The present scheme of period changes every hour or so encourages anonymity, alienation and conflict.

David Jones, the year master at one of the schools, reported on the success of a skills program which operated weekly for forty minutes. This gave teachers and students the opportunity to work together on team building activities which 'really helped them'. More radical, but perhaps more realistic, is the implementation of changes to structures. The model of secondary school as a factory feeding students through subjects every hour or so is obsolete but it continues as the dominant model for teaching in an age when it is quite inappropriate. Its main advantage is cheapness and this, allied with inertia to change, is inhibiting the introduction of alternative, more community oriented, forms of schooling.

There is no doubt that the students interviewed for this research are no angels. Even so, they deserve a fair go at school and it is clear they are not getting it. The implications for all

students is that the school is not a fair place to be, which is quite contrary to the professed goals of education. Worst of all, the students who suffer most from this injustice are those who have the least resources to support themselves: students whose parents are unwilling to come to the school to stick up for them, those who have emotional problems, and those who are culturally or racially different. As Davis & McCaul note (1997), civil rights commonly afforded adults—freedom of movement, association and belief—need to accompany those usually identified with school—nurture, protection and care. At present these freedoms are absent in many of our schools.

Carol: Yeh, well, I don't think getting suspended and getting sent home is really the answer because they're just going to lay around home and sit and watch telly, eat and you know, like nothing's happened. Something else should come out of it.

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