

**Tracking Re-visited: old measures for new times.
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Introduction.

Teachers , new and old, find classroom discipline one of the abiding experiences of the moral, social and political activity known as teaching. Their responses to students who misbehave can vary greatly depending on the student, the time of the day, the time of the year, school policy, their personal mood and factors seemingly little connected with misbehaviour in the classroom.

Teachers enter their rooms with personal agendas beyond the task at hand, beyond the needs of the children and the demands of the subject. The organisation, within which such agendas are played out, is composed of people with power over their lives and those of the children. The teachers are at once on view yet isolated in their room. They have multiple resources to assist them in their task yet when student misbehaviour is the issue so often the teacher is expected to cope, alone and unassisted. To seek help may be generally regarded as an indication of being less than able. To take the matter to the vice-Principal carries risks which may impact on career and contract. The teacher risks being labelled as possibly less than capable or at worst, incompetent

When confronted by students who appear to be less than able, schools and teachers respond in a variety of ways. In Victoria the whole school streams of Academic, Trade, Home Eco or General declined in use in the 70's and 80's but streaming continued to be employed widely in secondary Mathematics and some other subjects. While it might be argued that with the abolition of Technical Schools in Victoria at least that form of streaming ceased, there is evidence which points to the fact that within their local communities, and certainly at the school in this study, the 'Tech' retained its place as an option in the minds of parents choosing a secondary school for their children. (Edwards,1996). And certainly the private/Government divide remains.

Debate over streaming practices has now emerged in the USA and the UK with new vigour. (Boaler et al,1998; Reay,1998; Oakes et al,1997). Variously known as tracking (USA), streaming (Australia) or setting (UK) , it is a method by which schools place students in classes of supposedly similar ability. The argument is that this enables schools and teachers to better attend to the particular needs of the various, seemingly homogeneous groupings.

Arguments are now developing which assert that the re-positioning of such practices is no co-incidence but owes much to the marketisation of education and the predominantly white, middle-class preferences of parents as customers.

(Ball, 1997; Reay, 1998). Additionally, whereas the debates over tracking in the 1970's were concerned with structural inequities (Knight,1976; Kelly,1976), at present, with the emergence of the credentialling imperative of VCE, (Karmel,1997) subject streams are

emerging (VET) which effectively track certain categories of students. Finally, the late 1980's and 1990's witnessed staggering increases in suspensions in Victorian schools (Edwards, 1996, 212; Knight, 1997, 87). As this study shows suspension served a variety of purposes, not all of them redemptive. Therefore it is important that new definitions of streaming must take account of the growth of at least these three powerful determinants of student pathways in education - parent school choice, subject streaming and the prophetic role of multiple suspensions.

Implicit in this framing of the present discussion are the twin fears of getting it wrong - parents choosing the 'wrong' school and their children choosing the 'wrong' subject streams. Unlike the 1970's where young people had a fall-back position, and for some in this study indeed a preferred position, of gaining employment rather than completing secondary education, VCE credentialing is now perceived by young people to be crucial to life-path and failure to complete it successfully may have catastrophic effects for young people and their lives. (Lamb, 1998).

This paper will present data which shows that Transition programs and Remedial English programs may indeed be motivated by the best of intentions but they also play a significant part in setting a school path for certain students which may generate serious misbehaviour and end in school failure for the student.

This paper will present data drawn from a six year study of a single Secondary College in Victoria (fictionally known as Cowie SC) which shows a disproportionately large number of students in Year 7 withdrawal Remedial English classes being suspended and ultimately failing to complete their secondary education (VCE) at the school.

Further it will be shown that the school embedded in its programs implicit and explicit tracking practices through

- a very active Primary to Secondary Transition Program and
- the Year 7 withdrawal Remedial English program.

In this way the status flows from Primary schools to Cowie S.C. had academic implications for the children who went there.

Suspension as a tool of labelling and marginalisation.

There is abundant evidence that suspension served a multitude of purposes in schools not all of it salutary, effective, redemptive nor educational (Slee, 1987; Edwards, 1996). Following the abolition of corporal punishment in 1983 the use of suspension by Victorian Government schools expanded greatly in the 1980's with its use eventually encompassing all grade levels in Primary and Secondary education.

In 1987, 6787 students of the Victorian State School population of 244,248 were suspended.

In 1991, 15,546 students of the Victorian State School population of 227,825 were suspended. (Department of Education, data disk supplied to author)

What had previously been a largely Secondary school sanction grew rapidly in use in the Primary schools as foretold by Roger Slee. (Slee, 1987) Accompanying this dramatic rise in suspensions was a media-driven form of moral panic that portrayed schools as chaotic, blackboard jungles largely attributed to the abolition of corporal punishment in Victorian Government schools in 1983.

It will be argued there are both intended and unintended consequences upon the career paths of students often with deleterious effects for which perhaps the school had not planned or, in some instances, for which the school was quite grateful. The "problem student" left voluntarily - in teacher jargon, 'he finally got the message'. And it usually he.

(The male nominative will be employed as suspension is overwhelmingly a sanction used on male students. At the College under study only 4 of the 158 students suspended were female.)

Certainly the participation in the suspension process of the Remedial English students at the school in this study was beyond their proportion of the school population. There were practices which made suspension almost prophetic in determining which students would not be staying long in the school. Their ability to attract multiple suspensions must call into question the wisdom of dealing with the misbehaviour of struggling students by continually suspending them, excluding them from an education, whether they be willing scholars or not. Perhaps the school's approach to their reluctant education should have received greater attention.

School climate and procedures for dealing with misbehaviour can be redemptive or exclusive. Evidence is readily available to any school to examine the effects of its suspension procedures for changing student behaviour. For example, in the school under study multiple suspensions almost invariably ended in the student leaving the school or failing to complete VCE at that school. Where do suspended students go ? Quite a number of the multiply suspended students (3 suspensions or more in their time at the school) in the school under study were simply untraceable and follow-up studies were beyond the bounds of this paper.

The importance of suspension in this discussion lies in the fact that it appears to be the path for many students from being labelled and placed in Remedial English at the start of Year 7. It will be shown that despite the dedication and best efforts of the teachers involved, students in Remedial English were suspended in numbers beyond their proportion to the total school population.

Labelling the 'remedial' for streaming.

Labelling theorists hold to the view that the very process by which society or the vested authorities 'label' individuals further depresses the self concept of a child with a low self-concept. At its worst, the process of labelling may indeed cause an 'amplification' in deviant behaviour.(Lemert, 1951, 1967).

In educational terms this view was most aptly put by Pearl(1968)

"Some students are labelled minimally educable; as a consequence they are educated minimally and then grow up educated minimally".

The disproportionately large number of Remedial English students suspended at Cowie SC while satisfying elements of labelling theory (many low literacy students went to special withdrawal English classes at Cowie SC) also fall into the theorising offered by sub-cultural interactionists. In their view the experiences of school failure endemic for those of extremely low literacy (e.g. below Year 4 reading age in Year 7) would provide the situation within which such students would fix the blame for their position on the school. They would be able to identify each other easily (sharing the same Remedial English class every day) and feel that the school had singled them out and denied them the opportunity to be with the 'normal' English classes. Thus the preconditions for a resistant, male ,anti-school, sub-culture existed

by virtue of their low literacy and the school's labelling approach to their education. (Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981; Kelly, 1976). Pam Gilbert in her 1997 Radford lecture succinctly set the situation for these students.

'By being designated as reading failures, boys are positioned differently within school cultures, and are often withdrawn from the general curriculum and invited to see themselves as school drop-outs'. (Gilbert, 1998, 25).

Knight (1975, 1976) posited the ways in which schools "lock" students in or out, a view supported by Polk (1984 and 1988 ,p.110-115) who termed such students as "sponsored" or "marginalised" whereby the schools "track" them to success or failure. As the research was gathered so too were the inter-relationships explored and by 1982 Pink was able to demonstrate that disruptive behaviour, failure and school climate were all related. Ancillary to this were the findings of Polk (1984) who found resistance flowing from students where the school engaged in heavy labelling.

This became officially recognised in Victoria in 1984 when the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education published research by Coventry (et al) which established a strong connection between truancy and school practices and curriculum, a view Tony Knight had been stating for almost ten years.

It was the finding by McManus (1987) in the United Kingdom that school variables were the best predictors of the suspension rate which saw suspension presented as a predictor of school failure. He claimed that suspension fell by 50% in schools which changed their organisational procedures.

Research in the United Kingdom found a range of school organisational factors to be key ones in producing student alienation and disaffection with school. Hierarchical organisation, unequal personal relations between teachers and students and between students and students, authoritarian rule systems, rituals and routines and a strong academic orientation in curriculum were all found to be provokers of student disengagement. (Sharp and Green, 1975; Ball 1981; Burgess 1983).

Similarly research over a long period in the UK has consistently found that setting produces negative results for those students at the bottom of the sets.

(Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981; Tomlinson, 1987; Abraham, 1995; Boaler, 1997a, 1997b). Research from other countries, principally the US, supports this finding. (Dahlöf, 1971; Oakes, 1985; Keckhoff, 1986; Slavin, 1990; Donelan, 1994).

While it should be noted that Wiatrowski (1982) found little influence of tracking on 12th graders' misbehaviour in school, Berends , in a major review of the data drawn from a study of some 25,000 US 12th. Graders found *'compared to academic track students, general and vocational-track students have lower college expectations, more disciplinary problems, and are less academically engaged, controlling for prior school orientations and for selection bias due to dropping out of school'*. (Berends, 1995).

Labelling is at the heart of these practices, informed as they are by schools focussing on assessment, sorting and labelling procedures and less on curriculum approaches to meet student needs.

The State Background.

Since the beginning of state education in Victoria, Regulations were made for the organisation and running of the monolithic system into which it grew. These Regulations were centrally determined and it is those Regulations dealing with student misbehaviour in schools under the official heading of "Discipline" which dealt with the use of corporal punishment, suspension and expulsion - in that order. Of these three it is suspension which is germane to this paper.

Historically suspension had always been part of the schools' student management armoury and the inertia of historical practice (Ball, 1991) was simply adopted once corporal punishment was abolished. Its adoption by the Government and the schools created an environment in which schools were required to document student misbehaviour, and upon a certain number of suspensions being reached the student and the school faced a Regional inquiry. Schools took to this approach readily and the sheer weight of negative documentation on students began to approximate a guilt-by-documentation approach at inquiries. Such an approach allowed schools to avoid close examination of their own practices which evidence suggests play an important part in fashioning student misbehaviour (Knight, 1975, 1985; Polk, 1984; Oakes 1985).

Some students were offered choices involving quietly leaving the school or facing an official Regional inquiry following multiple suspensions or a particularly serious suspension. Students were placed on a Regional merry-go-round transferring from school to school following suspensions at each. Principals referred to this practice as "handballing your problems over the back fence". A rough code operating between schools required them to take students if they had "handballed" others. (Slee, 1987; Edwards, 1996).

Background to the case study school.

A brief profile of the case study school and two of its special programs will provide the context within which these tracking and suspension practices took place. The school under study does not exist in a vacuum and cannot be assumed to be identical to any other secondary school. It has its own defining characteristics, approaches to policy development and implementation and in Ball's terms "secondary adjustments" which are being made locally to state-wide policy announcements. (Ball, 1993)

The author was a long-serving, full-time teacher with the Department of School Education at the school under study and brings to this thesis an "insider's view" when addressing these questions and relating them to the role of teacher as researcher.

Cowie Secondary College was built in a suburb with a significant minority migrant population in Geelong, the largest provincial city in the state of Victoria.

Geelong is an industrial bay-side city with a heart-breakingly, near-great football team approximately 100 kilometres from Melbourne, the capital of the state of Victoria. Geelong's population is approximately 190,000. Cowie borders Geelong's major industrial complex which houses industries such as the Shell oil refinery, Ford Motor Company stamping, engine and chassis plants, International Harvester and numerous others. Ford was a major employer of migrant labour in its post-World War 2 years in Geelong and for many students at Cowie Technical School in the 1970's and 80's the job was an apprenticeship at Ford.

Cowie is essentially a dormitory suburb and shares with neighbouring suburbs a significant ethnic population and numerous smaller industries feeding off and servicing the larger industries mentioned above. Cowie's ethnic population is predominantly, in the old terms, Yugoslavian, though it should be noted that such terminology is unacceptable to a significant number of people living in Cowie.

Cowie Secondary College.

Cowie Secondary College was built as a Years 7-11 Technical School and it boasted an extensive and very well equipped Trade wing, latterly known as the Technology Studies wing. The school was only for boys until 1986 when the first intake of 26 girls in Year 7 took place. The local High School is five minutes walk away and it has always been co-educational. Built in such proximity, the schools clearly reflected the policy of the Government of the day, which was to offer both "types" of education to people in the one area, though it should be noted that the "Tech" was for boys only. This was the "heads versus hands" dichotomy which was reflected in the High/Technical school structure of Victorian Government secondary schools of that era. (Blake, 1973: 770-6). Students and/or parents chose or were directed to one or the other depending on whether they were good with their heads or hands at school work. From 1975 the school annually received substantial funding through the Disadvantaged School Program.

The bulk of students came from neighbouring and rural Primary schools. Over twenty primary schools provided students to Cowie S.C. in 1993. A significant minority of students came from outlying rural communities which had already established a positive relationship with the school. Students from these communities had many other schools from which to choose but they chose Cowie S. C. for a variety of reasons.

Parents who chose Cowie S.C. in 1993 for their Year 7 children were interviewed and gave as their most common reasons :

- a small school (4-500 students)
- a remedial English/Numeracy program
- an Integration program
- a well-equipped Trade wing
- the reputation of a caring staff
- the reputation of an effective Student Management System.

(Document in possession of author.)

Cowie S.C. had two special programs which are worth mention to help place it within the spectrum of what schools do to assist their students. It will be argued that one of the unintended effects of these two programs was to expose students to an increased threat of suspension by virtue of their implicit tracking and labelling practices.

a. Transition program.

Cowie S.C. was successful in its recruitment over the years under study largely due to an intensive Transition program, an information and recruitment program which involved a number of visits by hand-picked staff to feeder Primary schools in the months preceding school choice by Grade 6 students and their parents. It relied heavily on the efforts of the Year 7 Co-ordinators and the Remedial English co-ordinator- a woman who much respected in the wider educational community for her dedication to the Remedial English program. Each year a number of students come to Cowie S.C. simply because of the Remedial English program and its reputation in feeder primary schools. In addition a number of students were directed to Cowie by their Primary school teachers who had a tradition of sending certain students who were seen to be good with their hands but not strong academically

In an attempt to gather information about incoming Grade 6 students the Transition co-ordinator visited Cowie's feeder Primary schools. Following these visits

information about incoming Year 7 students was drawn up and distributed to the Year 7 teachers at Cowie S.C.

Comments such as the following are to be found in the transition notes supplied:

"Top performer. Intelligent. Will challenge authority. "

This student was suspended on four occasions. He had a chequered career at Cowie S.C., and eventually left of his own volition. Teachers were aware of his potential but found his manner abrupt and abrasive. He was not prepared to put up with authoritarian teachers. He was suspended for unacceptable language, vandalism, theft and fighting from Years 7 to 10.

"Lazy, hard to motivate. Popular trendy fellow. Tends to stand over younger children. Parents both work and over-indulge him. Lack of consistent discipline from home. Always has lots of money."

This student was suspended 10 times in Years 7 and 8 for disobedience(2), language(3), misconduct(2), disruptive behaviour(1), assaulting a teacher (1) and theft (1).

" Some problems basic skills. Will need some individual assistance and positive reinforcement. No self esteem and confidence. Fast worker but not accurate. Easily led. Immature. Problems with home life. "

This student was suspended 8 times in years 7 & 8 for misconduct (5), language (1) and fighting (1).(One suspension has no reason recorded.)

This information was supplied to teachers at the beginning of the year in an attempt to let them know which of their students needed special attention and help. No one Primary school provided the majority of Year 7 students to Cowie S.C. In fact the students annually came from approximately 25 different schools. Thus the relationships essential to their development at the school were structured in such a way that from the moment they began classes some were removed for what the author knows the students called 'vegie Maths' or 'vegie English'.

b. Literacy/Numeracy program.

This program ran at Year 7, 8 and 9. All Year 7 students were given the Schonell Speed Comprehension test (R4B) and the Daniel's and Dyack Reading Experience test (REA). Based on these results and detailed information provided by feeder primary school teachers, students were chosen by the Remedial English teachers to be members of withdrawal classes in literacy.

In Year 7 these students were withdrawn for 5 sessions each week and given intensive grounding in traditional literacy skills such as word attack and recognition skills and an intensive reading, writing, listening and self-organisational program. They were very much the 'skill and drill' classes Oakes found in her study (Oakes, 1985:88). Classes were also run at lunchtimes and after school for the interested and also as punishment for those who did not do the work set.

Based on R4B and REA test results approximately 25% of Cowie S.C. Year 7 intake was usually below Grade 4 reading levels. While such tests have their critics, the two

teachers involved in conducting the testing program and teaching the Remedial English classes believed that the figures were worrying and that the students deserved individual and separate help to improve their literacy skills. The Remedial English programme also operated at Year 8 and 9 levels but in the normal English classroom and in more subjects than just English. Some students regarded as very weak in Year 8 were withdrawn from normal English classes for one session of Remedial English each week.

These two programs of the case study school are important for they illustrate two of the ways in which the school sought firstly to select and secondly to provide specialist help for incoming students.

- The High/Technical binary for parents and students was in effect a form of post-primary self-labelling and tracking.
- The subsequent withdrawal Remedial English classes magnified this labelling and tracking in the context of the students' new school.
- Enveloping the new students in the school were also the parting comments by their Grade 6 Primary school teachers which in some instances further labelled and thus potentially marginalised these students.

The school's practices with these students neatly reflect Erikson's three stages of labelling:

- i. the formal judgement by the authorities (entry tests and Primary School Transition advice)
- ii. the announcement of some judgement (verdict or diagnosis) (weak in literacy)
- iii. an act of social placement...which redefines his position in society. (removal from 'normal' English classes, placement in Remedial English)

(Erikson, 1964)

This issue of labelling is central to the argument of this paper which asserts that despite the best intentions of the programs' teachers, these students were in fact likely to be labelled, marginalised and seen by the school as a 'problem'. They could not handle the normal classroom work. Many had already been identified by their feeder Primary school as 'problems' both behavioural and academic.

Remedial English students and Suspension.

The study which was undertaken at Cowie SC examined the school's records with regard to student discipline including the records held concerning suspension over the years 1987-1992. When compared with the state-wide figures for suspension Cowie SC was found to be suspending students at a higher rate than other Secondary Colleges in the state of its size which suspended students.

This section of the paper will examine whether relationships exist between the suspension rates of students and their placement in withdrawal Remedial English classes in Year 7 because of their low REA/R4B scores and/or on the advice of their feeder Primary school.

From 1987 -1991 approximately 195 students from a school population of 956 (approximately 20%) were placed in these classes for English in Year 7. The Year 7 students in 1992 have been excluded from this section of the study as there were no suspensions in Year 7 during that year. This curious situation, given Year 7

suspensions in previous years, was due to the efforts of the 1992 Year 7 Co-ordinator who chose not to use suspension in dealing with students' misbehaviour. He spent much time in discussion with them and in contact with their parents. It would appear that his close working and relationships with students and parents obviated the need to engage in the use of suspension.

It should be noted that cause and effect relationships are not being begged here, rather the degree to which these students figure in the school's treatment of serious misbehaviour needs to be established

Table 1 compares the numbers of Remedial English students who were suspended in their time at this school as opposed to the remaining school population.

TABLE 1

Suspension rates for Remedial English and non-remedial English students. 1987-1992.

1987-1992	no. of students	% of school	no. suspended	%
Remedial English	195	20	65	33
Other students	761	80	93	12
Total	956		158	

These figures are of great concern. The Remedial English students are being suspended at almost three times the rate of their 'normal' English class colleagues. Worrying though this figure may be of greater concern is their participation in multiple suspensions, that is, students who were suspended three or more times in their time at this school.

Table 2 shows the percentage of multiple suspended students (3 or more in their time at the school) who were members of the Remedial English classes:

TABLE 2.

Suspended students by number of suspensions / membership of Remedial English.

No . of Suspensions	No. of Rem.Eng. Suspended	No. of Total Suspended	Proportion of Suspended in Rem. Eng.
3	10	17	59%
4	5	10	50%
5	5	9	55%
Total	20	36	55%

Clearly the Remedial English students have a strangle-hold on multiple suspensions. (20/36). However when it is noted that 65/158 suspended students were or had been in Remedial English their participation in suspension (41%) is far beyond their numerical presence in the school (195/956 or 20%).

In simple terms, approximately 10% (20/195) of Remedial Students received multiple suspensions while only 4.7% (36/761) of their colleagues received multiple suspensions.

In summary, the school's efforts to attend to the needs of the students by segregating them into Remedial English classes may have been a contributing factor in their misbehaviour. If their presence in the suspension process is far beyond their presence in the school what evidence is there of their career path through the school? Is there evidence that students in such a group differ from their colleagues labelled 'normal' English as far as their persistence in education is concerned?

Remedial English students and entry to VCE

In order to trace the effects of tracking in the school's operations it is useful to compare the success or otherwise of the Remedial English students as opposed to the 'normal' English students in gaining entry to the final year of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

The Year 7 intake in 1987 was the second group to enter the school knowing that Year 12 was available for them should they wish to remain at the school. Prior to 1986 the final year was Year 11. Therefore there are only two groups in the school for whom persistence in education can be measured in terms of students remaining to attempt Year 12 - those who enrolled in Year 7 in 1987 (Year 12 / 1992) and 1988 (Year 12/1993).

The two groups are those Year 7 students who entered the school in 1987 and 1988 and completed their VCE studies at the school in 1992 and 1993 respectively. The 1987 group numbered 98 and the 1988 group numbered 93.

What is being explored here is the relationship between membership of the Remedial group in Year 7 and membership of the Year 12 group in later years at the school. Table 3 records the membership of VCE of three groupings of students

- remedial english students,
- the remaining or 'normal' english students and
- the whole cohort.

TABLE 3

Students Enrolled in Unit 3/4 VCE at Cowie S.C. in 1992 or 1993

	1992 (98 students)		1993 (93 students)	
Remedial English	28.94%	(11/38)	22.2%	(8/36)
"Normal" English	51.66%	(31/60)	38.5%	(22/57)
Whole Cohort	42.8%	(42/98)	32.2%	(30/93)

The data shown in Table 3 is cause for concern at the apparent inability of students from the Remedial English classes in Year 7 to progress to Year 12 in their studies. Approximately a quarter of them (28.9%) enrol for VCE while their "normal" English colleagues enrol at a much higher rate. (51% in 1992).

It should be noted that the school introduced Year 12 in 1986 just one year before the first of the two groups above came to the school. It took until 1991 before the school reached a Year 12 intake which stabilised between 40-50 students. The school had a lower than average retention rate to year 12. For a whole range of reasons (for example , its 'Tech' tradition of leaving at Year 11 or earlier for employment, economic circumstances or domestic need), students did not feel the need or did not wish to undertake the study required to complete Year 12.

In addition, the school was known in the area as a school where the emphasis was upon getting a job, preferably an apprenticeship. Whatever the reason the fact is that despite the recession in those years, which saw a rise in participation rates in VCE statewide, Cowie S.C. did not experience such an increase but also resisted the decline experienced by many Technical schools across the state.

Suspension and entry to Years 11 and 12. (VCE)

Allied to the lesser numbers of Remedial English students in Year 12 is the relative absence of students who had been suspended in their time at the school. In the light of these factors it is of interest to note the number of students who gained entry to year 11 (Until 1986 Year 11 was the final Year of the school). In simple terms:

- g. 68% of students who had never been suspended entered Year 11. (517 / 761
- h. 22% of students who had been suspended at once or twice entered Year 11.(27 / 122)
- i. 0.05% of multiple suspended students entered Year 11. (2 / 36)

Of additional interest too is the data on suspension for those who gained entry to the final Year of VCE (Units 3 & 4, or Year 12) compared to those who do not gain entry from the Year 7/1987 and Year 7/1988 cohorts.

The figures show a clear contrast in the experience of suspension. The figures reported in Table 4 are for the whole time they attended Cowie S.C.

TABLE 4

Suspension rates for VCE Unit 3/4 enrolled students compared with non-enrolled students from the 1987 and 1988 Year 7 intakes.

	Unit 3/4 VCE		Non-VCE	
1987	2.3%	(1/42)	23.2%	(13/56)
1988	3.5%	(1/28)	25.0%	(16/65)

The data would appear to support the contention that suspension is in some way related to students not completing their secondary education, at least at this school. Suspensions in Years 12 at Cowie S.C. were extremely rare so the non-persistence in their VCE studies was not due to suspensions in their Year 12. It should be noted however that from the 1987 group 12/42 and from the 1988 group 6/56 who enrolled in Year 12 started life at the school in the Remedial English classes. Nevertheless, the point remains that membership of the Remedial English classes was problematical for many students in that suspension was a far more common

experience for these students as opposed to their colleagues and appears related to their non-completion of Year 12 at the school.

The dedication and energy put into the Remedial English program, in the author's opinion cannot be denied, but the relationship between suspension and participation in those classes is too strong to be ignored. When that relationship is tied into persistence in education the figures are still most worrying. It would be too easy to suggest simple cause-effect relationships but it appears probable that the Remedial program fulfils the doleful prophesies made in the children's Primary school transition reports.

Given that the Remedial English students gained low scores on the R4B/REA tests and /or their Grade 6 teachers at the Primary school informed Cowie S.C. Transition team that they were students whose literacy skills were low and needed special attention, it may not be surprising that they found it difficult to get into VCE. It should also be noted though that the VCE was intended to give access to students who had low literacy skills by virtue of the Special Provision procedure which schools can use for such students.

Multiple Suspensions equals the label sticks?

For the years under study Cowie SC suspended 158 students. Of these some 36 students (all male) were suspended three or more times. Some members of this group of 36 share certain characteristics beyond their participation in multiple suspensions, most notably their membership of the Remedial English classes and their failure to complete VCE at the school.

- 34 of the 36 failed to enter VCE at Cowie SC. One completed VCE at Cowie SC.
- The school had no records of where approximately 40% of these students went after they left the school, an unusually high figure when compared to exit records for other students.
- Almost half of the 36 were suspended in Year 7 whereas only 9% of the remaining 122 suspended students were suspended in Year 7.
- 10 of the 36 were transfers in from other Secondary Colleges, Year 8 and above, 'under a cloud' as the vice-Principal put it.
- 12 of the remaining 26 were placed in Remedial English classes in Year 7.
- On average these 26 students received a POOR or UNSATISFACTORY rating in 50% of their studies in Year 7. By way of example, 12% of the 1987 Year 7 group received such reports.

While this group of 36 warrant a separate paper for the presentation of further data and discussion they are indicative of the resistance some students bring to schooling and the seeming prophetic labelling of their Grade 6 teachers' comments cited above.

Summary

In summary, students who were placed in Remedial English

- enrolled in VCE at half the rate of other students
- were almost three times more likely to be suspended than their colleagues. (33% versus 12%)

- were 250 times more likely to receive multiple suspensions than their colleagues (10% versus 0.04%).
- were receiving Fail assessments in approximately half their subjects by June of Year 7.

Conclusion.

Whatever hopes the parents or the students of these Remedial English classes may have had concerning their pathway in education, for many of them it would appear that they didn't happen at this school. The teachers involved in the Remedial English program brought great energy and dedication to these classes regularly running voluntary (for those who wished to attend) and punitive (for those who had failed to do work) sessions in their lunchtimes and after school. The teachers' efforts were in some degree rewarded as a number of their students did enter and successfully complete their VCE - a tribute to the students' persistence and efforts over six long years.

Depressingly though it would seem for some students membership of the Remedial English class was but the first step in a swift path to suspension and eventual premature departure from the school.

The tracking clearly began prior to their entry to the school in Year 7. Drawing upon their Primary school transition notes, it is clear a number of these students were already seen as problems or difficult or 'remedial' and the Secondary College was being made quite aware of these judgements by their Primary colleagues, writing them as briefing notes for the Year 7 teachers. The observations were now in writing and far more revealing than bland school reports.

A further step down the path was in some sense a step involving self-selection whereby the parents and /or student made a conscious decision to 'go to the Tech' despite the name-change for the school. It appears this may have been assisted by advice from the Primary School suggesting a more appropriate educational diet would be found in workshops than in academic classrooms.

The Secondary College's Transition team energetically promoted those aspects of the school which they believed enhanced its appeal to the parents - small school, special remedial programs, caring staff, strong discipline system and a good Trade wing (Technology Studies). This constellation of appeal would of itself target particular students and parents seeking such elements for their child's education - a small school with special help from a caring but firm staff and practical subjects.

Once at the school the students were tested, sorted and labelled and so the process continued. But now, they were separated, different and the misbehaviour began soon after. Failure compounded upon failure and by June of their first year at the school many of them were failing over half their subjects (mostly the academic ones) and they were, if not already, close to their first suspension.

Few would complete their studies at Cowie SC and the school which had spent so much time devising a strong Student Management System, developing withdrawal remedial programs and promoting itself in the community was finding these students engaging in serious misbehaviour and failing in their first year at secondary school. The future for these students looked bleak.

While I would not wish to generalise the findings of this paper to other Secondary Colleges in Victoria or elsewhere, they do point to a disturbing reality for a number of students at the school under study. Both systemically and organisationally they have been noted, documented and treated according to dubious testing regimes and anecdotal reportage designed to fix a label to them whether it be 'remedial', 'problem' or 'Tech material'. In these ways they have found themselves placed upon an educational track which in this case, for many of them, would appear to lead nowhere.

Postscript: Suspension?

Children will engage in misbehaviour from time to time which crosses the line between disruption of a classroom to criminal behaviour sanctioned by the law. Such criminal behaviour warrants swift and at times, emergency powers in the hands of the school administrators. Where the safety and security of other children or indeed of staff are seriously threatened, some form of immediate exclusion is obviously warranted.

Such cases, mercifully, were not common in the school under study. But for the rest, suspension would appear to fail in changing student misbehaviour, particularly multiple suspensions. Suspension in this way becomes a tracking, marginalising device which is indeed prophetic of exclusion.

Suspension's greatest attraction appears to lie with those not suspended and those doing the suspending. The suspended student is removed and the class and teachers are relieved of the burden of someone's misbehaviour. Little attention is paid to school practices or classroom procedures which might exacerbate or indeed produce misbehaviour.

Suspension can be an arbitrarily imposed sanction for arbitrarily determined behaviours. There may be little appeal to review or due process for the student beyond the school, and the act of suspension can be seen as a message from the school to the parents and the child that something is wrong with the child, not the school.

Unless suspension is viewed as a small and generally ineffective device, one of a range of efforts and procedures instituted by the school community to ameliorate student misbehaviour, it will continue to be used as a measure of first resort, blaming the victim and allowing the school the luxury of not having to examine its practices and procedures for their redemptive qualities.

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