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A Comparison of Behaviour Support Provisions Provided by Small Rural Schools & Large Urban Schools

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Abstract

The provision of resources and services to schools to support teachers and students has been an issue for small rural schools for some time. While most attention has focused on learning support, behaviour support is now seen as of equal importance. How schools support students with behaviour difficulties is central to Education Queensland's recently revised approach to behaviour management in state schools. The mechanism by which support is provided by schools is the Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students. Through this plan schools are required to identify the type and range of supports, programs and services to students requiring targeted (10 – 15% of the school enrolment) and intensive behaviour support (2 – 5% of the school enrolment). These supports are expected to include access to a variety of government and community services.

This paper explores the challenges facing small rural schools in providing necessary behaviour support for students who exhibit serious forms of challenging behaviour. Comparisons are made between the supports provided by 10 small rural primary schools and 10 large urban primary schools for students with difficult and challenging behaviour. Differences in the type, number and variety of supports are highlighted, along with a discussion of what these differences mean for the offering of a quality education experience by small rural schools.

The viability of small schools has been the subject of policy considerations and debate for decades now (ACT Department of Education & Training, 2006; Department of Education, Training & the Arts, 2007; Phillips, 1997; Save Our Schools, 2006). At the heart of the issue is the capacity of schools with small enrolments and small staffs to provide a quality educational experience for students (Caldwell, 2005; Ofsted, 2000). This focus is expanded to include the cost effectiveness of small schools and the fiscal economies that can be achieved by closing those schools and aggregating students, staff and resources to the one site (ACT Department of Education & Training, 2006).

In Australia and elsewhere the debate has centred on schools in rural and remote locations. However, with population drift and demographic changes in urban and suburban areas, schools there with shrinking enrolments have been earmarked for closure as well. The issue is a complex one, involving schools with long histories and traditions and the associated community regard for them (Weston, 2008). More pragmatically, closures and amalgamations can have a negative impact on families forced to transport children to schools outside of their immediate area (Productivity Commission, 2003).

While cost and social upheaval are major considerations and concerns in respect of decisions to close schools, educational considerations are at the forefront of arguments for and against such decisions. The pressure on small schools to justify their survival centres on the real or perceived disadvantage of small schools to deliver a comprehensive and quality curriculum, with staffing and resources sufficient to give students opportunities equal to those afforded by larger schools (Caldwell, 2005). This paper takes up this issue, looking in particular at the capacity of small schools to provide adequate levels of support to students who display serious forms of disruptive and challenging behaviour.

Behaviour Management in Queensland State Schools

The provision of services and supports to students who are unable to adjust and conform to school expectations for acceptable behaviour is a major education and social issue in Australia today (De Jong, 2006; Fields, 2005; Lewis, 2006). Similar concerns exist in education systems in the United States and in the United Kingdom (Ofsted, 2005; Rose & Gallup, 2006). The Department of Education, Training and the Arts in Queensland has responded to widespread concern about student behaviour by reframing its approach to school discipline and instituting procedures to develop a consistency of approach to behaviour across all its 1,300 schools. In 2006 the Department (better known as Education Queensland) produced and disseminated its Code of School Behaviour (Department of Education, Training & the Arts, 2006). The Code defines the behaviour expected of all members of the school community including students, teachers, school administrators and parents. Parents are provided a copy of the Code when their children are enrolled and are expected to sign it as evidence that they have read it and will support it.

The mechanism by which the Code is implemented in schools is the Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students (Department of Education, Training & the Arts, 2006). This is a detailed blue print for how each school intends to promote acceptable behaviour and respond to unacceptable behaviour. The Plan is required to identify the supports available to students whose behaviour is unacceptable. Particular attention is to be given to identifying services and resources available to support students requiring what are described as targeted and intensive behaviour support. These are students whose behaviour is seriously disruptive and challenging and is an on-going concern for school personnel. Students requiring targeted behaviour support are widely understood to make up about 10 – 15% of the school enrolment. Students exhibiting even more extreme behaviours and requiring intensive behaviour support make up 2 – 5% of the school enrolment. In both categories effective behaviour management requires strategies and support over and above what individual class teachers are able to provide. In defining needed resources and services, schools typically identify capacities within the school community to address the problem, but also community wide supports as well.

While the ability of a school to manage serious forms of misbehaviour depends on a number of factors, the availability of services and supports over and above what individual teachers can provide in the classroom and on the playground are absolutely critical when dealing with very difficult to manage students. All state schools in Queensland, regardless of their size and location are expected to provide these supports. Here in lies a significant challenge to small schools and schools in rural and remote areas of the state. Such schools, on paper at least, have both fewer internal and external supports to draw on, and those that are available may not be immediately or readily accessible. This poses an important question. In a state system that is seeking to achieve high standards of behaviour in schools and a consistency of response to unacceptable behaviour, how can small and poorly resourced schools hope to meet these expectations with the limited resources at their disposal?

A Study of Rural and Urban Schools

Employing a document analysis research strategy and focusing on the School Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students, the study reported here sought to (1) identify the supports available to schools and to students with significant behaviour problems, and (2) to compare the number and type of supports identified by large urban primary schools to those identified by small rural schools. The study looked at the Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students developed by 10 large urban primary and 10 small rural school communities in Queensland. The plans were then analysed holistically to get a sense of the overall school strategy for responding to unacceptable behaviour and how students with chronic and serious behaviour problems were to be both managed and supported to better conform to school expectations.

Procedure

Schools were identified through the Education Queensland website using the Schools Directory link. Within that website, 10 small rural primary schools and 10 large urban primary schools were selected. Small rural schools were defined as schools with a student enrolment of less than 150 and located at

least 40 kilometers from a regional population centre (small to medium size country town). Urban schools were defined as schools with a student enrolment greater than 500 students and located in a provincial or coastal city, or within the Brisbane and Logan-Beaudesert regions.

All Queensland state schools have websites and these are accessible to the public via the Education Queensland website or directly via an internet search. Within each school website the school Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students (RBPS) can be found, most often through the Documents/School Policies link. School RBPS are developed using a departmental template with mandatory sections including: a rationale for the plan, beliefs about learning and behaviour and processes for facilitating standards of positive behaviour and responding to unacceptable behaviour. In this latter section details of whole school support and of support for students needing targeted and intensive behaviour support are to be provided. In addition, the plan is expected to provide information on consequences for unacceptable behaviour, along with the network of student support including programs and services within and outside of the school. The plan concludes with a statement about consideration for individual differences, related state legislation, departmental policies, and finally a list of resources and references. These resources include materials readily available to all schools regardless of location or size. They include the National Safe Schools materials, the Bullying, No Way! resources and the Mind Matters program.

Results & Discussion

Services and supports for students needing targeted and intensive behaviour support fall into three categories. These include **school level supports**, i.e., those supports that can be marshaled through existing school human and material resources. They include **district supports**, i.e., those provided through the school district in which the school resides. Finally, there are **community supports**, supports provided through government departments and private agencies. Some of the most commonly cited supports identified by all 20 schools in the study are listed in Figure 1.

At the community level there were few differences between supports identified by small and large schools. On the surface at least, it would appear that small rural schools are equally able to draw on state and private agencies whose primary purpose is supporting children and families in need.

Figure1. School, District & Community Supports for Students with Behaviour Problems

School Level Supports	District Level Supports	Community Supports
Guidance Officer Behaviour Support Teacher Behaviour Support Team Special Needs Committee Head, Special Education Unit Learning Support Teacher ESL Teacher Teacher Aides Parent Volunteers	District Guidance Officer District Behaviour Support Team AVT Behaviour Support AVT (Disabilities) Therapists (Occupational, Speech, Physical) Management of Young Children Program (MYCP) Behaviour Management Funding Positive Learning Centre	Department of Child Safety Child & Youth Mental Health Services Juvenile Aid Bureau Queensland Health Services (Nurse) Police Liaison Officer School Chaplain Adult Mentors

Knowledge of how these agencies function however, would suggest that there would be differences in the extent to which the services provided by these agencies could be accessed in a timely manner. For example, schools draw on personnel from the Juvenile Aid Bureau when behaviour problem students are found to engage in theft, including shoplifting, vandalism, arson and drug possession. However, officers of the Juvenile Aide Bureau are located mostly in large population centres and are not readily available to attend schools in rural and isolated areas. Where there are emergencies, a rapid response could not be expected when the incident occurs some distance from the Juvenile Aid

Bureau office. The same could be said of services provided by the Department of Child Safety, Child and Youth Mental Health Services and Queensland Health Services. Similar problems of availability may also apply to police officers who also act as School Police Liaison Officers.

At the school district level, once again, small and large schools identified a similar range of supports. In theory at least, small schools wherever they may be can call on the full range of services provided by Education Queensland. Where a need is justified, small schools can receive behaviour management funding from the District Office and they can access the services of the District Behaviour Support Team and AVT Behaviour Support. It is a reality though that these support personnel service a large number of schools, and, as is the case in Queensland, over a very large geographical area. Such personnel will often be based at the District office or at one school, invariably a large school in a population centre. Small rural and remote schools will be visited, but could not expect a service of any great duration, intensity or frequency. Students in rural and remote schools who might qualify for placement in a Positive Learning Centre (PLC) (Suspension Centre) may simply be suspended or expelled from school as enrolment in a PLC could necessitate extensive travel or even relocation.

It is at the school level that significant differences in services and supports are most evident. Small schools do not have a Guidance Officer on site and rarely if at all would they have a full-time or even part-time Behaviour Support Teacher or other specialist special education teachers including learning support teachers. All of these services are located centrally within the school district and in schools with larger enrolments. Small schools may have a special needs committee and/or a behaviour support team. Where both exist, there is likely to be a considerable overlap in personnel, stretching to the limit the time and energy of school staff. School level support in small schools falls very much on the shoulders of class teachers and school administrators, the very same people who first registered the need for support over and above what they themselves can provide. The staff of many small schools are recognised for their enthusiasm, energy and creativity in maximizing curriculum options

and learning opportunities, and this can apply to the management of difficult behaviour. There is no denying though that serious problems of misbehaviour can require services and expertise that would not normally and reasonably be expected of just a handful of teachers and one administrator in a small school.

There are a number of ‘front line’ strategies that schools can employ to minimize the problem of serious student misconduct. Looking at the RBPS of the 20 schools in this study a significant number of such strategies were identified as part of the behaviour management approach of the schools (see Figure 2). Unlike many of the district level and community supports discussed earlier, these strategies are not dependent on the size or location of the school. In some respects the smaller the school enrolment the easier it is to consistently and effectively implement, monitor and maintain, for example, anti-bullying strategies and programs such as the Responsible Thinking Process (RTP) and Restorative Justice. In addition, in schools with small enrolments students are more easily supervised in and around school buildings and in the playground. Having said this, this study found that larger schools had many more options they could draw on compared with smaller schools.

Figure 2. Comparison of Behaviour Management Strategies
 Used by Small & Large Schools

Small Schools	Large Schools
Behaviour monitoring Playground monitoring system Restricted play area Playground buddy (older student) Temporary playground withdrawal	Behaviour monitoring Playground licence Playground monitoring system Restricted play area Playground buddy (older student) Temporary playground withdrawal

<p>Special seating plan</p> <p>Time out area/cool-off cards</p> <p>Subject withdrawal/changes</p> <p>Buddy teacher/classroom</p> <p>Individual behaviour plan/contract</p> <p>Counseling (Guidance Officer)</p> <p>Restorative Justice conference</p> <p>Peer mentoring/tutoring</p>	<p>Special seating plan</p> <p>Time out area/cool-off cards</p> <p>Responsible Thing Classroom (RTC)</p> <p>Subject withdrawal/changes</p> <p>Buddy teacher/classroom</p> <p>Functional Behaviour Analysis</p> <p>Individual behaviour plan/contract</p> <p>In-class supervision (Teacher Aide)</p> <p>Social skilling: small group</p> <p>Anger management training</p> <p>Teacher aide withdrawal sessions</p> <p>One-on-one with behaviour support teacher</p> <p>One-on-one with deputy principal or principal</p> <p>Adult mentors/parent volunteer</p> <p>Counseling (Guidance Officer)</p> <p>Restorative Justice conference</p> <p>Peer mentoring/tutoring</p> <p>Alternative education program</p> <p>Modified school attendance</p>
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Small schools appear to be at a disadvantage in respect of acquiring resource materials and commercial programs to address the social, behavioural and mental health needs of students. Figure 3 provides a listing of the resources and programs which the large schools and the small schools in this study accessed and used. Small schools identified fewer resources and programs in critical areas such as social skills training and anger management. Some resources and programs can be very expensive and outside of the capacity of schools with small enrolments to afford. In addition many programs employed in working with problem behaviour students require staff training. This too can be expensive as well as time consuming. The training and professional development opportunities afforded teachers in larger population centres are undoubtedly far greater than those available to teachers in rural and remote areas.

Figure 3. Programs & Resources for Problem Behaviour Students

Small Schools	Large Schools
Stop Think Do Pathways to Peace You Can Do It	Friendly Schools & Families Program Kids Matter The Games Factory Stop Think Do Pathways to Peace You Can Do It Bounce Back Cool Kids Program Rock & Water Program Build-Up Zone (BUZ)

Summary & Conclusion

This study investigated the resources, services and other supports schools draw on in working with students with serious behaviour problems. Comparisons were made between a sample of 10 small rural primary schools and 10 larger primary schools located in urban areas. Data was derived from the schools Responsible Behaviour Plans for Students. These are detailed and often quite lengthy documents describing the school's approach to promoting positive behaviour and managing unacceptable behaviour. RBPS contain a wealth of information and are unique in Australia in terms of the amount of information revealed to the school community and the broader community about the operations of the school in respect of school discipline. The major focus of the study was on the extent to which small schools, compared to larger schools, could draw on the supports needed to manage serious forms of misbehaviour.

In some respects small rural schools can access the same supports available to schools with high enrolments and located in large population centres. What on paper is available, may however in practice, be not easily or readily accessible given where these supports are often located and the logistics of reaching some rural and remote school communities. The study revealed that small schools have far fewer options in terms of both behaviour management strategies and specific resources and programs. In reading the RBPS of small schools there is a strong sense of school personnel working to their limits and perhaps beyond to do what is necessary to maintain high standards of behaviour in the school. However, there appears to be no shortage of optimism and enthusiasm for the task.

It is important to note that small schools are recognized as having many advantages, and in the United States there is a strong movement to creating smaller schools, particularly in urban areas for this reason (National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2008). Advantages include smaller class sizes, increased school safety and greater participation in extra-curricular activities. Teachers in small schools tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, have less absenteeism and take more responsibility for ensuring that students are successful in school. Students in smaller schools are reportedly no worse off in respect to academic achievement than their counterparts in larger schools. Perhaps more significantly for the study reported here, closer and more positive relations are thought to be developed between students and school staff in smaller schools and that this leads to students feeling more connected to the school community and less alienated (Jimerson, 2006). These advantages may not operate in all small schools, but where they do it would seem to act to counteract some of the disadvantages in terms of limited access to important services and supports. Where these limitations exist and where their negative impact is reduced this can be attributed to the hard work and dedication of school personnel.

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