Understanding school responses to students’ challenging behaviour: A review of literature

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Abstract
This article explores the varied ways in which schools can respond to students who present with challenging behaviours and who are at risk of disengagement from learning. It sets out a typology of school responses and reflects on the philosophies which underpin each approach. In an effort to rethink the use of suspensions within schools, which contribute to the marginalization of children, the article highlights a range of alternatives to exclusionary practice. It outlines the key elements of approaches that are successful in reducing school suspension and makes evident the benefits of an approach that is tailored to the whole ecology of the child.

Keywords: engagement, exclusion, student participation, suspension

Introduction
Children who exhibit challenging behaviours at school are considered at increased risk of academic failure, delinquency, dropping out, gang membership and adult incarceration (Dunlap, 2006). These behaviours can be caused by biological, environmental, psychological and/or social factors and are a significant educational and social issue when they present at school. School responses to students’ challenging behaviour within the learning environment is varied but often involves excluding the student from their learning in some way. Mechanisms can include suspension, expulsion or other forms of exclusionary practice.

There is concern about the increasing number of children who are suspended from school and the growing incidence of suspensions among young children, including those in preschool and the early years of primary school (Collin and Law, 2001; Fahey et al., 2007; Perry et al., 2008; Phillips, 2005). The use of suspension as a disciplinary practice is an educational and social policy issue in Australia and internationally. There is evidence for the increased use of suspension in the United Kingdom, United States of America and to a lesser extent New Zealand. This article explores: i) why exclusion is perceived as an appropriate response to challenging behaviours; ii) the impact of this
practice in its many forms; and iii) alternative child-centred responses that schools might employ.

Exploring alternatives to exclusionary practice is particularly important for children in the ‘middle years’. The 9–14 years age group are often overlooked when designing policy responses to children and young people’s issues, particularly when they are part of disadvantaged communities (NSW Parliamentary Committee, 2009). Yet the middle years is the time when school suspensions increase and disengagement from school escalates (Bland and Carrington, 2009). Withers (2004: 31) describes how the skills acquired during primary school can ‘decay’ and that ‘excessive time out of school in the middle years may well exacerbate the “decay” process’. Affected students are often making the transition from primary school to high school and increased suspensions at this time has been attributed to the different structure of the high school system which is less personal, involves several teachers and usually an increased number of students in the class (Partington, 2001). There is typically a narrower curriculum, increased emphasis on assessment and a focus on discipline despite the onset of adolescence and its many pressures. Moreover, secondary schools have been noted as more likely to use authoritarian approaches than primary schools (Nickerson and Spears, 2007).

To elucidate how schools respond to students’ challenging behaviour, the review is structured as follows. Section 2 explores definitions and conceptualizations of ‘challenging behaviour’. Sections 3 and 4 examine the impact of school exclusion on students and their families with a particular emphasis on the impact within disadvantaged communities. Section 5 presents a typology of school responses and reflects on the philosophies which underpin each of the four approaches while Section 6 looks at the influence of differing social constructions of children. Section 7 draws out the key elements of inclusive school responses to challenging behaviour. Concluding comments are offered in Section 8.

**Challenging behaviours**

‘Challenging behaviours’ is a broadly used term which is difficult to precisely define. It refers to behaviour that is seen as abnormal within the context of a person’s culture. It can denote a range of behaviours such as self-injury, aggression, sexualized behaviour and abuse of property and often refers to the co-existence of one or more of these behaviours. A common definition of challenging behaviour is:

> Any repeated pattern of behavior or perception of behavior that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement with prosocial interactions with peers or adults. (Smith and Fox, cited in Dunlap et al., 2006: 5)

Challenging behaviours at school are a concern to society (Nickerson and Spears, 2007), as schools are expected to be safe places for children. Challenging behaviours are also of concern to schools that have a duty of care to provide a safe setting that facilitates learning for students and a secure and safe place of employment for staff. Therefore, educational institutions must have some way to address the dynamics of school aggression and violence (Massey et al., 2007). A long history of dealing with students who will not follow school rules and disrupt the classroom (Morris and Howard, 2003) has meant that discipline has become an integral part of the educational
setting. It is important to acknowledge that students’ challenging behaviours is a difficult issue for schools to address (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009).

School exclusion is now the accepted directive for a range of behaviours that are considered to put the school community at risk, such as violence, aggression and increasingly disruption. The more alarming tendency is the use of school suspension as punishment for other, less severe, behaviours (Lloyd et al., 2003). Brownstein (2009) notes that challenging behaviours are becoming more broadly defined as ‘. . . truancy, tardiness and vague catch-all categories such as “insubordination” and “disrespect”’. Traditionally, challenging behaviours were seen as actions that put the school community at risk and involved physical violence, rendering students dangerous and warranting exclusion. However, they now also encompass those behaviours that are not aggressive but are perceived to produce psychological and developmental harm, like bullying and verbal abuse. Noguera (cited in Nickerson and Spears, 2007: 5) claims that ‘in schools, violence is often equated with insubordination, student misconduct, and disorder’.

The common assumption is that students are positively engaged with their school and that school suspension is a contrasting period of disengagement which students will avoid. However, this conviction is misplaced. Suspension from school is not a strategy that works for those marginalized at school and is not always appropriate for certain sub-groups of children within the school community (D. Nixon, personal communication, 2010). As such, schools need to find ways of working with their students and the community to address the complexity that is challenging behaviours.

Kohn in McCluskey et al. (2008) argues that often schools seek conformity and compliance for the sake of obedience. We argue that discipline not founded on clear evidence of student actions is not about children’s learning but about maintaining the status quo of power structures within schools which presumably eases the task of teaching (Haynes, 2005). It may be useful then, to reflect on the widening of behaviours that are perceived as ‘challenging’ and ask to whom are these behaviours challenging?

Children’s resilience also interplays with the way challenging behaviour is perceived and impacts on engagement at school. In a study by Bottrell and Armstrong (in press), young people’s understanding of their risky and threatening behaviour was explored with them. The study suggests that students’ challenging behaviours may be an indicator of resilience, and that although young people might participate is risky activities, they still value their learning and hold hopes and ambitions for the future, including employment. It might be the case that challenging behaviours are a method of communication used by children to show their dissatisfaction with the process of their schooling.

Impact of exclusion from school

There is limited discussion in the research literature of the impact of school exclusion on children and young people, and their families within disadvantaged communities but the evidence available strongly suggests that the consequences of an infraction from school are severe and enduring for all involved. This includes not only the students themselves, but school staff, the school community, parents and families and the society at large (Dunlap, 2006; Nickerson and Spears, 2007).
Suspensions are usually demarcated as ‘out-of school’ or ‘in-school’ suspensions (Brownstein, 2009). ‘Out-of-school’ suspensions are a defined period of time where the student is prohibited from attending school and usually asked not to enter the school grounds. The student is then constrained to be disengaged from their learning. They may spend this set time away from school, with or without supervision, as their family circumstances allow. In disadvantaged communities, families may have additional and/or complex needs that compound the lack of support available to the student when they are away from school. Alternatively, suspension may be ‘in-school’, where the student is segregated from other students but remains at school. Despite being at school, students can be left to bide their time with little to be engaged in, and with or without teacher supervision. Schools that have limited resources may have no alternative but to use out-of-school suspensions as a behaviour management strategy that results in student disengagement from learning.

Suspension is most likely to lead children into a life of marginalization (Collin and Law, 2001; Howarth, 2004). Individual emotions such as shame, resentment, frustration and powerlessness are experienced by students who are excluded from their school community (Partington, 2001). Other negative feelings can emerge, such as alienation and positive attitudes towards antisocial behaviour (Taylor and Fairgray, 2005). Obviously, a repeated pattern of being excluded from school results in reduced academic achievement, disengagement from education and naturally reduced employment opportunities (Knipe et al., 2007).

While there are not many studies on the long-term impact of suspension, some have strongly linked school exclusion to antisocial and/or violent behaviour. Hemphill and Hargreaves (2009) showed that students who were suspended from school were 50 percent more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and 70 percent more likely to engage in violent behaviour, at least within the subsequent 12-month period. The authors clearly demonstrate the negative impact of school suspension over and above other influences. Brownstein (2009) indicates that during out-of-school suspensions, there is more opportunity for students to become involved in harmful conduct than if they were given an ‘in-school’ suspension. In serious circumstances, where the challenging student behaviour leads to a referral to the justice system, the links between school and crime are clear. Students perceive the school setting as resulting in their negative association with the law.

In addition to the impact on an individual student’s well-being, Massey et al. (2007) refer to the impact of suspension on a range of other stakeholders including the school community (peers, teachers, counsellors, etc.) and the community at large (including parents and community workers). They discuss the disruption that occurs, how it affects the quality of teaching efforts, interrupts learning and compromises the overall functioning of the school. Further research is required on the impact of exclusionary discipline policies on the wider community.

**Disadvantaged communities**

There are now established and clear links between high student suspension rates and schools being located within disadvantaged communities (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009; Hemphill et al., 2010; Lloyd et al., 2003; Nickerson and Spears, 2007; Taylor and...
Fairgray, 2005) and higher rates of school violence in schools located in disadvantaged communities (Brunson and Miller, 2009). Areas of disadvantage are identified as neighbourhoods with a high incidence of poverty, crime and low parental educational levels (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) among other factors. Nevertheless, this Australian and international research does not necessarily support a causal relationship between disadvantage and challenging behaviours in students.

The stereotypical image of disadvantaged communities may be significant in determining the use of suspension in schools. The suggestion is that ‘… students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds may be subject to more punitive discipline, regardless of crime in the neighbourhood’ (Nickerson and Spears, 2007: 24) and that more punitive consequences of challenging behaviours are delivered in a less than professional manner (Hemphill et al., 2010). Many schools that have a high proportion of students of low socioeconomic status administer punitive consequences more often and rely on formal administrative structures rather than on philosophies of children’s participation as compared to wealthy schools (Nickerson and Spears, 2007).

There are more tangible factors which influence suspension rates and the approach selected by a school to address disciplinary issues. These include school size, neighbourhood crime, location, school level (primary or secondary) and socioeconomic status (Nickerson and Spears, 2007). However, the intangible variables that drive the rate of school exclusion within schools of the same socioeconomic status are also worth noting. These include the level of parent and community involvement (Drolet et al., 2006; Laluvein, 2010; Reid, 2009), resources at the disposal of the school and community (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), strength of leadership within the school (Reid, 2009; Riordan, 2006), degree of commitment and skill of school staff (Altshuler, 2003; Burton, 2006; Cowling, 2009) and potency of collaboration between the school, family, community and the child (Cowling, 2009; Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009; Reid, 2009; Riordan, 2006).

How do schools think about challenging behaviours?

One of the stronger influences on school suspension rates is the school’s position on why students present with challenging behaviour and how it delivers scholarship in response to the student’s circumstances (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009; Hemphill et al., 2010; Howarth, 2004; Munn et al., 2000, cited in Knipe et al., 2007). The ‘... ethos and educational ideology of schools, and the way schools operate their disciplinary and support systems, effect the level of disciplinary exclusion’ (Lloyd et al., 2003: 79). The acclaimed program, Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is described as needing a considerable shift in a school’s approach to students’ needs (Southern Poverty Law Centre, 2008; see Appendix). It has been implemented by 7000 schools across the United States at all grade levels, and has shown to be effective in low socioeconomic status areas with high levels of poverty and ‘at-risk’ students.

Most responses to unacceptable behaviour at school can be categorized into one of four approaches. They are described either as punitive measures, academic models, or therapeutically focused programs (Morris and Howard, 2003; Nickerson and Spears, 2007). The fourth approach combines some or all of these methods in a tailored way to match the needs of the student. These approaches are now discussed in detail.
Punitive approaches

Punitive strategies involve blanket rules around what is and is not acceptable behaviour at school. These strategies do not take into account any individual personal, educational, developmental, social or other circumstances of the child. If students break the rules, the consequences apply regardless of circumstance. Ultimately, these punitive practices punish the child, and assume that they have consciously and deliberately decided to cause trouble and that penalizing them will be corrective of that behaviour (Morris and Howard, 2003). This is sometimes referred to as the ‘deficit view’ where the student is seen as being at fault and must be fixed.

Punitive practices do not maintain a pleasant, safe or engaged school community as exemplified by the failure of zero-tolerance policies in the United States. The practices are inappropriate because of their incongruence with the current international commitment to, and ongoing emphasis on, social inclusion (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2008). Exclusion segregates not only the student being suspended, but their family and community. This in turn cultivates an atmosphere of tension and discord between students, teachers and the community. Zero-tolerance policies are not used in Australia; however, some aspects of practice may still be punitive and aim to restrict the autonomy of students. For example, loss of student privileges, detention/Saturday school and keeping students off the bus for misbehaviour. These are all policies based on an authoritarian philosophy (Nickerson and Spears, 2007).

Academic approaches

A number of school responses seek to address underlying academic concerns in an effort to reduce the difficult behaviour. Morris and Howard (2003) detail programs that are geared towards providing additional educational instruction and support as a response to students who are perceived to misbehave. This may be useful to students as it takes account of some of their unique traits and learning styles within the learning environment. A local example of this flexibility in curriculum delivery is the Engaging Again intervention where learning is ‘...experiential, hands-on and utilizes technology in learning’ (Griffiths and Rees, 2007: 4). It is a 20-week program of interactive learning provided off-site with a class size of 10 students.

The academic approach assumes that challenging behaviours develop as a result of insufficient development in the child’s academic ability and competency. While this may be the case for some students, for others, there may be further underlying social, environmental or psychological causes for their lack of aptitude. Modifying curriculum and using flexible delivery options is an approach that may have some merit for working on academic outcomes. Yet for students from disadvantaged communities learning difficulties may be the consequence of more deep-seated struggles in other domains of their ecology. In this respect, the approach provides a limited response to challenging behaviour by not taking account of the broader contexts of children’s lives.

Therapeutic approaches

A third approach looks to identify other external motivations or conflicts within the individual student that need resolution. The school and its staff understand that there is
an underlying problem that students need to work through in order to move forward and before they can modify their behaviour. Morris and Howard (2003) discuss programs with this approach that aspire to support students to acknowledge their struggle and reflect on, and accept responsibility for, their actions. Once again, this approach may have merit for students living in low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods where a number of social circumstances can affect their ability to engage well with their schooling. The therapeutic approach takes an ecological perspective of the student, in which they are positioned centrally, while accounting for students as a heterogeneous group with differing capacities, capabilities, contexts and needs.

The On-Campus Intervention Program (OCIP) (Massey et al. 2007 see Appendix) or Think First (Larson and McBride, 1992; see Appendix) programs developed in the United States are examples of programs with a therapeutic focus. OCIP has counselors that provide individual or group attention to students who have been separated from other students. Students also complete academic work and are supervised by a teacher who can provide assistance. Think First provides a 10-week curriculum in anger management and conflict resolution. The critique of therapeutic approaches centres on programs that continue to ignore young people’s social context and past negative experiences of therapeutic intervention or which potentially lead to more punitive measures for the student if they fail to engage or respond to the advice and strategies suggested in the programs (Bottrell and Armstrong, in press).

**Tailored approaches**

The final approach consists of strategies that are consistent across the school and home environments. They address the learning and individual social well-being of students and are the most adept at reducing challenging behaviours. Programs that are both academic and therapeutic in nature, but also tailored to individual students, tend to provide a suite of options which cater for the range of circumstances in which students find themselves at risk of exclusion. In the United Kingdom, McCluskey et al. (2008) indicate how tailored approaches conceptualize children’s needs much more broadly and see barriers to children’s learning as being pedagogical, institutional, social and/or individual. This has allowed provision to be made for life events that can affect children such as family bereavement, trauma, illness, disability, giftedness and being talented. Within the context of disadvantage, this is a positive step towards an ecological and holistic approach to the provision of learning.

Siraj-Blatchford (2009) proposes ‘cultural cultivation’ as a pathway to improving children’s learning outcomes, which extends beyond the classroom. Schools can account for the significant influence of home learning environments on children’s intellectual and social development by enhancing the capacity of parents to engage with their children in pedagogically beneficial activities at home. Her study involved children aged 3–11 years and showed that providing supplementary opportunities for extracurricular activities, such as music lessons within disadvantaged communities, is immensely useful. Tailored approaches demand the investment of significant time and resources which are indispensable in addressing the needs of individual students in a range of contexts. They also require a strong commitment to the principles behind the approach itself and school staff may not often work in this collaborative way outside of the school environment.
Social constructions

Different schools choose different approaches to address challenging behaviours but may not have examined closely the underlying social constructions that have guided their choice. The new sociology of childhood paradigm links the way adults construct children to the way in which they are treated. It highlights that children are commonly constructed as incompetent and passive which can prevent them from being taken seriously by adults, in this case, by school staff. The hegemony of developmental theories of childhood that prescribe specific skills to the age of the child (Hutchinson and Charlesworth, 2000) make it difficult for adults to account for the knowledge and skills that children do have as a result of their experience in the world as opposed to how long they have been living. These developmental theories are common within an educational context, and are often the source of curriculum development. The tasks children are expected to complete at school are based on their age rather than their competency.

With respect to disadvantaged communities, the social construction of children at school can either draw out their strengths or multiply the lack of opportunity that they may encounter on the home front (Bottrell and Armstrong, in press). There are many ways in which children are constructed by adults. Students who present with challenging behaviours are at risk of being constructed by adults as ‘evil’, needing to be controlled (Sorrin and Galloway, 2006: 14) and their ‘behavioural problems have largely defined . . . student identity’ (Bottrell and Armstrong, in press). This would mean that children from disadvantaged communities can be doubly disadvantaged. Sorrin and Galloway (2006: 15) suggest that such a construction of children ‘. . . does not consider the issue of real material social conditions such as poverty and unemployment, conditions under which some children live’. Teachers’ views of children contribute heavily to their commitment to address student behaviour and prevent suspension in a collaborative way (APA, 2008; Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009; Laluvein, 2010). Therefore, it is valuable to reflect on the views of school staff in order to determine the influence these underlying social constructions have on the choice of school response to challenging behaviour.

Unpacking the social constructions at play in exclusion from school can be useful in two ways. First, it assists in distinguishing between different school responses. Punitive and partly academic approaches as described earlier would seem to be driven by social constructions of children as future citizens in the making, with childhood merely at a stage of biological growth and maturity (Prout and James, 1990). Therapeutic approaches, while they offer some acknowledgement of children’s individual characteristics and social contexts, do not engage with the multiple parts of the student’s ecology as completely as tailored approaches.

Second, analysing social constructions is useful in acknowledging the asymmetrical power relationships between students and teachers that exist in educational settings (Laluvein, 2010). Consideration needs to be given to the power of teachers over children (Bottrell and Armstrong, in press; Brownstein, 2009). Adult attitudes around children’s competency are closely associated with issues of power and discipline, over which children have no control (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009). They are also clearly
linked with children’s outcomes following an incident of misbehaviour (Burton, 2006). A social construction of children as incompetent, coupled with an abuse of power (albeit often unintended), can see the student emerge as a passive consumer of education (Holdsworth, 2005).

In comparison, children who are involved as active participants in their own learning have more success in modifying their behaviour and responding positively to behaviour programs (Elliot, 2004; Laluvain, 2010; Reid, 2009). The concept of children’s participation enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child 1989 seems to be evident in schools that have achieved behavioural change in the classroom. This has occurred as students have genuinely participated in decisions around their learning (Boylan and Wallace, 2009; Cowling, 2009; Laluvain, 2010; Reid, 2009). In order to foster engagement of students, they must be given ‘serious things to do’ at school (Holdsworth, 2005) and their views listened to. However Lloyd et al. (2003) concedes that schools often do not have time to listen to students. Within disadvantaged communities, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) has talked with children who said that being ‘bored’ led to misbehaviour and therefore lower academic attainment. This reflects what we know contributes to resilience in children (Newman, 2002). Ilona Bruveris (2006, slide 14) sums up this perspective nicely:

Challenging behaviour is reduced when children have opportunities to make choices, develop friendships, be leaders, take responsibility, be treated with respect, have their feelings supported and their frustrations attended to.

Unfortunately, the routine practice of not including children’s perspectives or engaging them on issues is also evident in the literature on school suspension. Research presenting or examining children’s views on ways to address students’ challenging behaviours is minimal and will be a research priority for UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families. One notable exception is the study by Bland and Carrington (2009) where middle school students were researchers on disengagement and engagement in their own schools and peer groups. This work has resulted in those very students becoming engaged in their own educational issues and pursuing ways of working together and learning with their teachers. Children and adults often perceive issues differently because ‘Children are party to the subculture of childhood which gives them a unique “insider” perspective that is critical to our understanding of children’s worlds’ (Kellet, 2005: 1). The lack of children’s views in research on school suspension is unfortunate because it is likely that children’s strategies for maintaining compliance within school will be different to those preferred by adults.

Key elements of inclusive school responses

In this section we discuss the three key elements of inclusive school responses to students’ challenging behaviours. These are the need for a multi-tiered approach, collaboration across domains and the development of strong relationships.

A multi-tiered approach

There are a number of stages at which student behaviour can be tackled and at different intensities. Universal or primary intervention programs are designed for all
students of a school and aim to bring about change on a wide level. Common examples include anti-bullying programs and declaring schools no-drug zones. Targeted programs or secondary interventions are steered towards a specific group of students within the school. Students may be at-risk of suspension, have presented with challenging behaviours on a number of occasions and/or have been identified as beginning to disengage with their learning. Examples may include anger management classes and group work on social skills development (Burton, 2006). Individual or tertiary intervention programs are those intended to deal with behaviour after the event. While school suspensions are one approach there are other examples which are not exclusively punitive or which can be used in addition to exclusion such as regular one-on-one counselling, alternative educational programs and/or follow up intervention.

A key technique to shifting student behaviour is to use a multi-tiered tactic that utilizes universal, targeted and individual programs (Massey et al., 2007; Reid, 2009). The Positive Behaviour Supports (PBS) program (Brownstein, 2010) demonstrates this approach, particularly in disadvantaged communities in the United States, as does the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (Massey et al., 2007; see Appendix) in the UK. The right combination of short-, medium- and long-term programs, customized to child, school and community needs is widely regarded as a valuable modus operandi. Implementing universal and targeted interventions provides preventative and proactive measures that can assist in moderating challenging behaviours before they occur. Tertiary interventions can then be maintained as a necessary course of action in the most extreme cases.

**Collaboration across domains**

A large volume of the literature supports a collaborative multi-sector approach to working with issues of challenging student behaviour. Strong links between school, community, and family are one of the most fundamental and vital elements of the most promising programs (Collin and Law, 2001; Cowling, 2009; Massey et al., 2007; Partington, 2001) regardless of other strategies that are being utilized (Riordan, 2006). Children also considered these connections as essential when students were in danger of being suspended, expelled or already had been excluded (Knipe et al., 2007). This indicates that they perceived these links between school and family as a necessary preventative measure, not only as a link to be developed after suspension had occurred.

Studies on the impact of school-based support, such as social workers (Johnson et al., 2006) and mental health workers (Nickerson and Spears, 2007) demonstrated that students responded well when they were involved with support staff that could cross a number of domains. The range of interventions carried out by social workers in the American study by Johnson et al. (2006: 262) included:

... escorting students to court hearings, working with probation officers, helping with paperwork required for enrolling in alternative educational programs, providing information about services for siblings ... holding training seminars for parents and families, and putting families in touch with community resources ... supported families as they re-enrolled their
children in school, and worked with appropriate school counsellors to ensure the students received continued support after they returned to school.

One of the basic elements of collaboration within an educational context is a ‘whole of school approach’ (Hemphill et al., 2010; Reid, 2009). The principal purpose of educational systems is controversial and many would argue the key responsibility of schools is to provide children with an academic education. However, Massey et al. (2007) suggest that schools do need to address aggression and violence using preventative and intervening approaches, as a part of that educational aim. When the whole school body is occupied with positive changes in the school environment, it builds a shared knowledge of the issues and a collaborative way to address them. For example, the Learnscapes program (Boylan and Wallace, 2009; see Appendix) connects with the culture of the Indigenous community through its core component of active participation of students, teachers, parents and community groups.

**Strong relationships**

In the many programs that have been reviewed in the literature, the one component that is consistently associated with positive outcomes is the establishment of a close relationship between the student presenting with challenging behaviours and a supportive adult within, or closely associated with, the school. Burton (2006) describes a number of individual and group strategies as effective, yet highlights that the relationship between the student and the teacher/facilitator is essential for positive outcomes. Morris and Howard (2003) stress that a supportive adult needs to build individual rapport with the student. The Check & Connect program (Brownstein, 2010; see Appendix), although a tertiary intervention, emphasizes that the student who has been suspended should meet with a teacher several times a week following their return to school to receive support. This allows a strong relationship to form between a student who has experienced exclusion to ensure that they regain a sense of belonging and to replace the exclusionary experience with inclusive practices.

Altshuler (2003) in his work with middle school students concluded that successful practices included ‘trusting relationships’. The students themselves identified the need for a supportive person who they could rely on and who was familiar with the school system. Bottrell and Armstrong (in press) found that ‘With positive relationships and facilitated co-operation, abiding by rules is “easy” [for students]’. This implies that the power dynamics that exist within a school structure are influential, and children are invariably in a less powerful position than adults and staff. This observation parallels comments made earlier in the discussion on the social constructions of children. In a conversation about the power within schools, Howarth (2004) suggests that for the student, a positive relationship with a person in power (such as a teacher) can provide the student with a way to contribute to how they are perceived by the school. This is a perception over which they would otherwise have no control. He states:

> Hence, in relationships that offer positive and congruent representations of one’s social groups, pupils have the opportunity to participate in the social construction of their communities and so develop positive self-identities. (p. 370)
In essence, this positive relationship offers some influence over teacher attitudes towards the student. The personal liaison with the student extends the teacher’s knowledge of the student’s context which is commonly hidden from teachers, and may provide a depth of understanding of the challenging behaviour. This, in turn, is encouraging for the student and helps them see themselves in a different light.

Drolet et al. (2006) suggest that employing school social workers was one of the best pathways to reducing challenging behaviours in students as they made connections not only with the students but with the parents and that ‘the complexity of the relationship is a key element on which the social worker may build a collaborative framework’ (p. 208). The authors hint that the earlier these ties are made, the stronger they become over time and can result in increased collaboration between school and family domains. Laluvein (2010) sees partnerships between teachers and parents as being able to ‘overcome the problematic of status and power’ (p. 186), which he says can undermine successful communication between school and family.

Relationships have also been acknowledged as basic to the concept of restorative justice practices. These practices premise ‘the need to restore good relationships when there has been conflict or harm; and develop a school ethos that reduces the possibilities of such conflict arising’ (McCluskey et al., 2008: 405). The Scottish Restorative Practice Project (McCluskey et al., 2008; see Appendix) clearly illustrates these practices. Not only is establishing positive relationships between students and school staff important, but so is re-establishing them if they have been severed. The motivation behind the concept is to maintain the school as socially inclusive. This is in sharp contrast to many discipline policies aimed at addressing challenging behaviours via exclusion. Restorative practices usually rely on a ‘whole of school’ approach (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009; Hemphill et al., 2010) where the whole school community has a part to play in bringing about behavioural change. This program has also been implemented in ways where students and staff enter into a personal relationship to address behaviour (McCluskey et al., 2008). In either way, restorative justice practices work within a paradigm of respect for children and their agency, flexibility and a willingness to accept that educating students is a multi-dimensional and complex task for which schools are responsible.

**Concluding statements**

Exclusionary practices experienced at a young age will likely lead to ongoing and intergenerational exclusion in later life. Conversely, experiences of socially inclusive practices at an early age will model tolerable social behaviour for children. Adopting inclusive practices within the school milieu by prioritizing preventative and proactive school-based solutions at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention is imperative. Students in general gain from violence prevention and well-being programs as do students at risk and students who have experienced exclusion. A holistic approach to behavioural issues, leads to a range of potential pathways for maintaining student discipline.

It can be said, that strong links between community, school and family are indispensable and fit well within a model of inclusive practice. Although a local and customized
model of these links is well recognized in the literature, there is a range of ways in which links are established, function and are maintained. Which combinations of strategies are most effective is not universal and a particular model cannot simply be applied to all communities.

The main element of successful responses embedded in the studies reviewed is collaboration to meet the needs of students, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. In developing a response to challenging behaviour, schools need to be flexible and tailor their response to the child and their varied contexts, including the resources available within the school and broader community. In essence this may require a combination of approaches to a student’s behaviour which include consideration of their academic, developmental and therapeutic needs. Punitive approaches are not considered to be constructive responses. Where exclusion is part of established educational policy, suspension with services that support educational and therapeutic needs is a preferred option than enforcing exclusion of a student from school without services.

Collaboration is often about relationships between teachers and parents who can each play a role in preventing suspensions. Where parents and the community are seen as partners not problems then it is possible to forge sturdy connections on which to base open and constructive communication. This is one of the key solutions to addressing student behaviour. Facilitating positive relationships between parents and their child’s school can be difficult because of the inherent power imbalance, particularly where this has been intensified because a child has been suspended or is at risk of suspension. Community organizations are particularly well placed to take up this role, as are school-based social workers or mental health support staff. Further training for teachers is important, not only around how to work with children in individualized ways on social and emotional issues, but more principally on awareness of how these issues can impact their behaviour and associated engagement in learning at school.

Essentially, a school’s perception of their students, their school and their community will shape their response to students with challenging behaviour. A social construction of children as incompetent and passive precedes their objectification within the education system, as witnessed by the labelling of children as troublemakers and failures. Schools need to reflect further on the philosophies which underpin the policies chosen to address students’ challenging behaviour.

In conclusion, different combinations of strategies that are locally positioned, coupled with strong school leadership can reduce school suspension rates and increase student engagement in learning. More specifically, the findings drawn from this literature review point to the importance of a tailored approach to each child’s needs which avoids a construction of children that is stereotypical. The response should instead be informed by evidence where the child is the primary source of information about their experiences, difficulties, challenges and, most of all, their strengths. This approach creates space for input from teachers on educational progress but also makes room for community programs, parents and other support staff to contribute their perspectives and work together on the best strategies for behaviour management and promoting school engagement.

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## Appendix Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of program</th>
<th>Type of approach</th>
<th>Level of intervention</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference/source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Behaviour Supports (PBS)</td>
<td>Whole school approach</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>A combination of multi-tiered prevention strategies that are evidence-based, developed school wide but which require teacher buy in and a whole of school approach.</td>
<td>Brownstein (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Schools/ Healthy Students Initiative</td>
<td>Individual social, behavioural and mental health orientation</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>A combination of Think First, OCIP, Social Skills Training and mental/behavioural health services.</td>
<td>Massey et al. (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learnscapes</td>
<td>Whole school</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>Use of the school’s outdoor environment for learning purposes but has a core element of active participation by students, parents and the community.</td>
<td>Boylan and Wallace (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think First</td>
<td>Individual emotional, social and behavioural</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Anger management and conflict resolution 10 week curriculum for secondary students. Empirically tested for building skills within the classroom and is culturally sensitive.</td>
<td>Larson and McBride (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-Campus Intervention Program (OCIP)</td>
<td>Academic, emotional and behavioural</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Student remains at school but separate from other students. Student completes academic work supervised by a teacher and a counsellor is available to provide individual or group intervention.</td>
<td>Massey et al. (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check &amp; Connect</td>
<td>Individual academic, social and behavioural</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Student meets one-on-one with a teacher several times a week to receive support.</td>
<td>Brownstein (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Restorative Practice Engaging Again</td>
<td>Restorative justice</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>A range of meetings, activities and lessons based on fostering mutual engagement and accountability, empathy and fairness. 20-week intervention with a class size of 10. Off-site until a re-integration structure of half-day interactive learning with half-day classroom based learning until student can return to the class.</td>
<td>McCluskey et al. (2008) Griffiths and Rees (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[a\] = Primary intervention, 2 = Secondary intervention, 3 = Tertiary intervention.
References


Cowing S (2009) Suspending welfare payments to promote school attendance: Strange logic, unlikely outcomes and a better way. ACOSS National Conference, 2–3 April, Sydney.


