Policy in Practice: Enabling and inhibiting factors for the success of suspension centres

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Abstract: Suspension centres are a government initiative to help address disruptive student beahviour in NSW government schools. The centres are for students on long suspension from school and have not been formally evaluated. Stakeholders were asked their opinions regarding: what are the best things happening with suspension centres or what should be maintained with suspension centres?; what needs to be improved with suspension centres?; and what evidence is there that suspension centres are meeting the Purpose and Goals as outlined in the Guidelines? Responses revealed that the best things happening or things that should be maintained included that: students were learning skills related to academic activities and behaviour and that suspension centre staff were using appropriate approaches and had good skills in managing students with disruptive behaviour. Things that needed to be improved included: communication and use of suspension centres and that students' schools needed to provide ongoing support for students who were referred to the centres.

Introduction

While the majority of students engage in learning and school life quite happily, a small number of students, for various reasons, do not. Of this small number, some students are described as behaving in a way that disrupts the learning of themselves and/or others. Such students are referred to as having "disruptive behaviour" which poses a significant problem not only within the education system, but often within the broader society. Australian research has shown that while disruptive student behaviour is not a widespread problem amongst large cohorts of students in any one school, the effects of such behaviour are significant (Vinson, 2002) and that poor student behaviour is one of the top concerns for classroom teachers (Freiberg & Reyes, 2008). Researchers have identified the negative impact disruptive student behaviour has on student learning outcomes and teacher wellbeing. As Mooney et al. (2008) state:

The implications of student behaviour for learning are becoming an increasingly major concern of teachers, parents and policy makers in Australia. Disruptive student behaviour not only impedes learning outcomes for students but also impacts negatively on teacher efficacy and wellbeing (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001; Lewis, 1999). (p. 1)

The importance of supporting schools in addressing disruptive student behaviour is highlighted by the work of Australian researchers such as De Jong and Griffiths (2006); Porter (2007); and Richmond (2007) who cite a range of theories on how disruptive student behaviour is best addressed. Significant government funding has also been directed towards a range of initiatives to help address disruptive student behaviour over the past 15 to 20 years. In New South Wales, Fields (2005) identified one of the "most significant educational decisions made by a state government" as the "introduction of separate educational facilities for chronically misbehaving students" (p. 6). In 2003, Dr Andrew Refshauge, the then Minister for Education reported the following to the General Purpose Standing Committee.

We have provided $48.4 million in the 2003-04 State budget, and over the next four years for a range of placement and support options for students with disruptive behaviour….

There is also a further $8 million in this year's budget over four years … to establish 20 new suspension centres to implement behaviour modification plans for students…. By 2007, we would have established 20 new suspension centres and more than 5,000 students we expect to have benefited from that initiative over that time. (p. 26)

Suspension centres are one of the more recent government initiatives implemented to help address disruptive student behaviour in NSW government schools. The Department's *Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Suspension Centres* defines suspension centres in the following way.

The suspension centre is an intervention for students who are on long suspension and have been identified by their school as likely to benefit from a structured program to assist their successful return to schooling as soon as possible. (para. 1)

Suspension centres, in supporting students on long suspension from school, are unique world-wide. They are positioned as an alternative from the traditional model of suspension where students are excluded from attending school and left to the supervision of their parents, or the community. Of interest to this research was that initiatives such as suspension centres have been implemented with little or no evaluation as to whether they promote positive outcomes for students with disruptive behaviour or school communities in general. Schön (1995) reflects that "a gap often exists between the policies advanced in formal policy documents versus how those policy documents are actually implemented" (p. 33). This research aimed to identify the enabling and inhibiting factors for the success of the centres from the perspectives of "people on the ground" (*stakeholders*) and to compare suspension centre practices to the suspension centre policy to reveal whether practice reflected policy.

As school change expert Michael Fullan (2007) argues, until initial use of practices begins there is no experience base from which to make well-informed decisions about what is needed to advance the work. This research aimed to contribute new knowledge and improve practice relating to a new model of support for students with disruptive behaviour (Maxwell & Kupczuk-Romanczuk, 2009, p.136). Exploring the operation of the centres can benefit education systems nationally and internationally in generating new knowledge relating to supporting students who are suspended from school.

There are key terms used in this research with which readers may not be familiar. Descriptions are provided for these key terms to assist in conceptualising how suspension centres relate to school suspension and the range of "people on the ground" who are associated with suspension centres. The descriptions follow.

Suspension Centres

Since 2004, 22 suspension centres have been established by the Department to support students on long suspension from school across New South Wales. The Department's policy framework titled *Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Suspension Centres* (*2006*) (the Guidelines) defines the centres as "an intervention for students who are on long suspension and have been identified by their school as likely to benefit from a structured program to assist their successful return to schooling as soon as possible" (para. 1). The *Purpose* of suspension centres is described in the following way.

The new suspension centres will:
–   form part of a range of behaviour services for students who are disruptive (school discipline plans, behaviour team support to schools, withdrawal programs);
–   increase the capacity of schools to deal successfully with disruptive students; and
–   assist students to make a successful re-entry to schooling. (para. 2)

The Department's *Suspension and Expulsion of School Students-Procedures (2011)* defines *Suspension* as "only one strategy for managing inappropriate behaviour within a school's student welfare and discipline policies" (p. 3). The Department implements two types of suspension from school: short suspension and long suspension. The Procedures outline that subject to certain factors (such as, considering a child's age, developmental ability, disability) principals may impose a long suspension for reasons which include: "physical violence"; "use or possession of a prohibited weapon, firearm or knife"; "possession, supply or use of a suspected illegal substance"; "serious criminal behaviour related to the school"; "use of an implement as a weapon"; and "persistent or serious misbehaviour" (pp. 8-9).

Regions, Suspension Centres and Stakeholders Groups

This research encompasses a large state government organisation with a number of different stakeholders working in different areas within the organisation. Therefore, it is important to describe the Department's regions, locations of the suspension centres selected for the research, and key stakeholder groups associated with the centres. This is represented diagrammatically as Figure 1. An explanation of the key elements follows Figure 1.
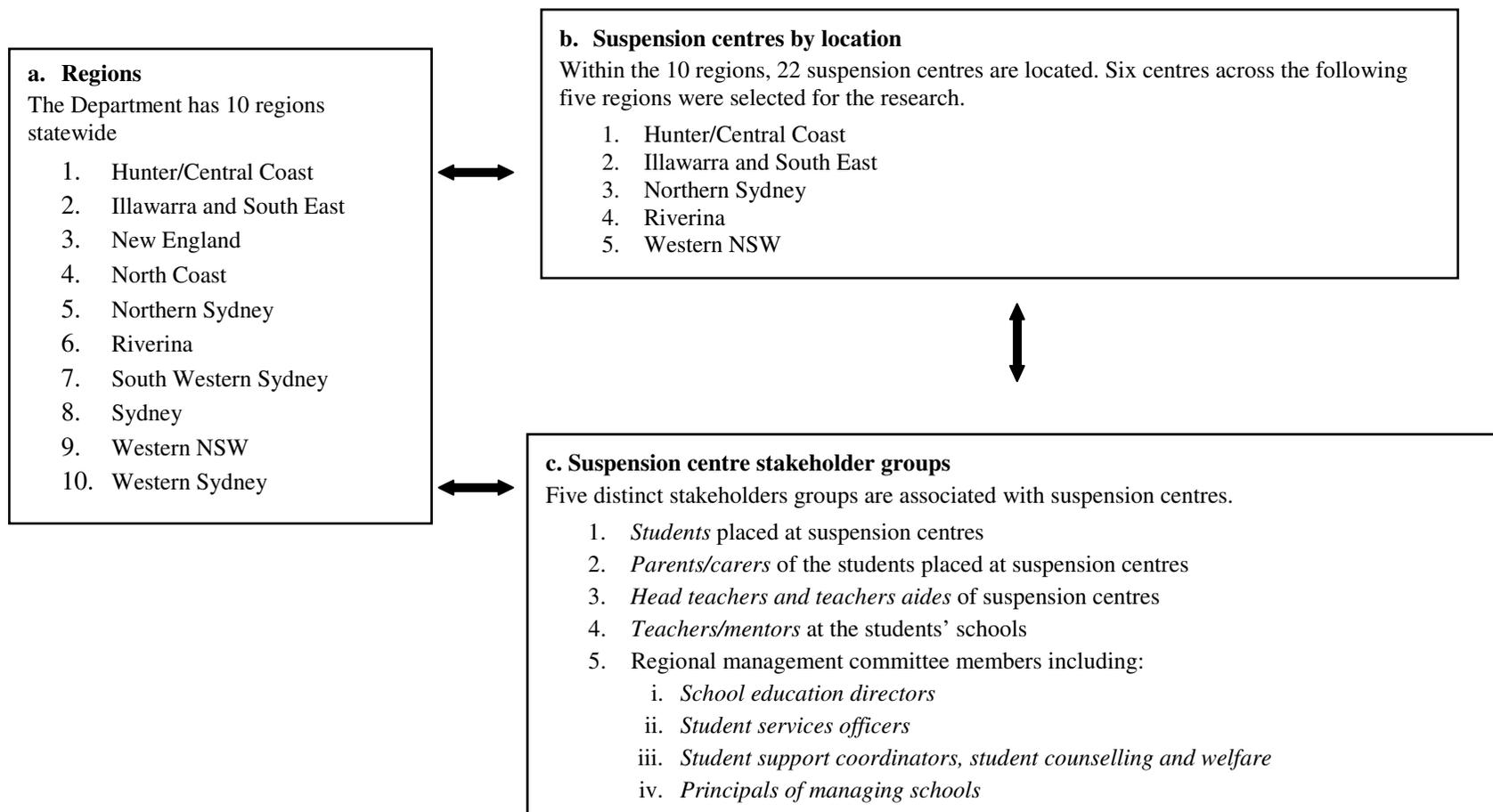
a. Regions

The Department has 10 regions statewide

1. Hunter/Central Coast
2. Illawarra and South East
3. New England
4. North Coast
5. Northern Sydney
6. Riverina
7. South Western Sydney
8. Sydney
9. Western NSW
10. Western Sydney

b. Suspension centres by location

Within the 10 regions, 22 suspension centres are located. Six centres across the following five regions were selected for the research.

1. Hunter/Central Coast
2. Illawarra and South East
3. Northern Sydney
4. Riverina
5. Western NSW

c. Suspension centre stakeholder groups

Five distinct stakeholders groups are associated with suspension centres.

1. *Students* placed at suspension centres
2. *Parents/carers* of the students placed at suspension centres
3. *Head teachers and teachers aides* of suspension centres
4. *Teachers/mentors* at the students' schools
5. Regional management committee members including:
   i. *School education directors*
   ii. *Student services officers*
   iii. *Student support coordinators, student counselling and welfare*
   iv. *Principals of managing schools*

Figure 1: NSW Department of Education and Communities Regions, Suspension Centres and Stakeholder Groups

Explanation of key elements in Figure 1.

a.   Regions
In 2011, the Department consisted of 10 regions statewide. The research took place in five of the regions including Hunter/Central Coast, Illawarra and South East, Northern Sydney, Riverina and Western NSW.

b.   Suspension centres by location
The 22 suspension centres are located across NSW in all 10 regions of the Department in buildings separate to mainstream classrooms in a mixture of metropolitan, non-metropolitan, and rural areas. Six centres across five regions were selected for this research.

c.   Suspension centre stakeholder groups ("people on the ground")
The suspension centre Guidelines refer to five groups of people associated with the centres who are referred to as *stakeholder/s*. A brief description of the stakeholder groups follows.

1.   *Students* placed at suspension centres.
The Guidelines (2006) state the following in the Definition. "The suspension centre is an intervention for students who are on long suspension and have been identified by their school as likely to benefit from a structured program to assist their successful return to schooling as soon as possible" (para. 1).

2.   *Parents/carers* of the students who were placed at suspension centres.
One of the Goals of the suspension centres is to "provide skills development opportunities and support for the parents/caregivers of the students" (para. 4).

3.   *Head teachers* and *teachers aides* of suspension centres.
The suspension centre Guidelines (2006) refer to staff of suspension centres in the following way.
•   The head teacher appointed to the centre will have experience in teaching students with disruptive behaviours.
•   A teachers aide special must be employed at the centre whenever the structured program is operating. (para. 10)

4.   *Teachers/mentors* at the students' schools.
The suspension centre Guidelines state the following: "The student will be linked to a mentor teacher while in the suspension centre program. The mentor teacher will support the student's return to school" (para. 12).

5.   *Regional management committee members*.
The *General Operating Principles* in the Guidelines state: "The suspension centre will be established under the auspices of the regional student services executive and managed by regional school and student services executive" (para. 3). The executive who oversee the operation of the centres in each region include school education directors, student services officers and student support coordinators. A brief description of the functions of these positions follows.

    i.*School education directors:*
The school education director is one of the region's senior educational leaders... and has clear line management responsibility for schools in their designated, operational area….

    ii.*Student services officers*: Provide consultancy support to schools in the implementation of the Department's policies, priorities and programs.

    iii.*Student support coordinators*: "Provide leadership, management and co-ordination of student welfare initiatives and student counselling services across the region".

    iv.*Principals of managing schools*: The suspension centre Guidelines (2006) outline the role of *management committees* which are chaired by a principal. The Guidelines state, in part, that a "managing school must be designated by the regional director" and that "the principal of the managing school (if different from the chair) will attend regional management committee meetings" (para. 8).

Literature Review

Some of the issues relating to disruptive student behaviour and the strategies that have been implemented by governments and education systems to address such issues provide the context for this research. An overview follows under the following three areas.
- Australian and international research relating to managing student behaviour in schools over the last 10 to 15 years.
- Some of the supports available to NSW Government schools to help manage students with disruptive behaviour; and
- Australian and international supports to help schools manage students who have been suspended or excluded from school.

Australian and International Research Relating to Managing Student Behaviour in Schools Over the Last 10 to 15 Years

Teachers face the complex task of catering to the socio-cultural and academic curriculum within classrooms to ensure that the needs of all students are met. This is a task researchers describe as more challenging owing to educational reform and curriculum changes during the past 10 to15 years. Wanjura (2000) for example, found the following in relation to the impact of educational change on the roles, responsibilities and resulting work of classroom teachers.

With the recent Government initiated demand that all students be educated in inclusive classrooms, there has been considerable impact on teachers and their teaching practices. Along with the students who have been diagnosed with various learning, physical, and behavioural disabilities, there seems to be an increasing number of those who are undiagnosed in our classrooms. These trends cause considerable concern for teachers and impact on their teaching in many ways. (p. 1)

Similarly, other researchers have reported on the increasingly challenging nature of teachers' roles in catering to students with diverse needs (Rigter & Broadbent, 2002; Stuart, 1994; Youseff, 2001).

During the past 10 to15 years a range of Australian and International research has been conducted relating to how teachers manage the tasks of teaching. This has included research relating to teacher stress or burnout (Thomas, Clarke, & Lavery, 2003; Thomas,

2009); how teachers spend their time in the classroom (Richmond, 2007; Tarricone & Featherston, 2002); beginning teachers' concerns and adjustments to teaching (Goh & Mathews, 2011; White & Moss, 2003); and teachers' attitudes toward integration and mainstreaming of students with special needs and challenging behaviours in mainstream classrooms (Gilmore, Cambell, & Cuskelly, 2003; Konza, 2008). An overview of the research reveals some of the issues that have been reported relating to the management of student behaviour in schools.

Australian studies have found, for example, that students with 'behaviour problems' or 'disruptive behaviour' influence teacher stress and teacher attrition (Certo & Fox, 2002; Patterson, Roehrig, & Luft, 2003; Thomas, 2009). Youssef (2001), for example, said the following.

The most common concern cited by preservice, beginning and experienced teachers as well as being the focus of media reports, professional literature and staffroom conversations is students' classroom behavioural problems. Both novice and experienced teachers express concerns and focus on classroom management skills and admit that it is a distinctive factor in causing stress…. Moreover, students' behavioural problems are always referred to be among the key reasons teachers mention when resigning from Government secondary schools in Australia. (p. 6)

These research findings are of particular significance for classroom teachers because managing student behaviour comprises a significant percentage of teachers' work in classrooms (Vallance, 2001) and research in Australia over the last 10 years, identifies poor student behaviour as one of the top concerns for classroom teachers (Freiberg & Reyes, 2008; Thomas, Clarke, & Lavery, 2003; Vinson, 2002; Youssef, 2001). Australian research has also shown that while disruptive student behaviour is not a widespread problem among large cohorts of students in any one school, the effects are significant. In 2002, for example, the Vinson Report found that, although small in number, "misbehaving students can disrupt learning and demoralise teachers and fellow students" (p. 52). Similarly, other researchers such as (Opuni & Ochoa, 2002) note that disruptive student behaviours within the learning environment have a rippling effect "influencing the disruptive individual, classmates, the school, and subsequently near and far communities". Classroom disruptions impact on teaching and learning time and "school climate and student achievement are casualties of these disruptions" (as cited in Evertson & Weinstein, 2006, p. 735).

Such research inevitably raises the question as to the types of supports required by teachers, schools and education systems to manage disruptive student behaviour effectively.

Supports Available to NSW Government Schools to Help Manage Students with Disruptive Behaviour

For NSW Government schools, if, despite implementation of a range of school and regional supports, a student is suspended from school or their behaviour is such that is felt that the student can no longer be maintained in a mainstream educational setting, students may be referred to a range of specialist settings. Researchers such as Fields (2005) cite the "introduction of separate educational facilities for chronically misbehaving students as one of the most significant educational decisions made by a state government" (p. 6). Some of the "separate educational facilities" provided to government schools include suspension centres; tutorial centres and programs; behaviour schools; and emotional disturbance schools. The Department provides statistics that: "In 2010 there are 1029 available places in NSW specialist schools supporting behaviour" (paras. 1-2 & 4-5).

The alternatives for students when they are suspended from schools are either to stay at home or in the community for the duration of their suspensions, or to attend placements at

suspension centres. Suspension centres, in supporting students who are "likely to benefit from a structured program to assist their successful return to schooling as soon as possible" (para. 1), support the Department's *Suspension and Expulsion of School Students-Procedures (2011)* which states the following.

> Suspension is not intended as a punishment…. A suspension resolution meeting must be convened by the principal at the earliest opportunity. The expectation is that students should be returned to school at the earliest opportunity. (p. 9)

Australian and International Supports to Help Schools Manage Students Who Have Been Suspended or Excluded From School

Much of the literature relating to other countries such as New Zealand, Britain, and the United States of America focus on "alternative education programs" for students with disruptive behaviour or who are "alienated from school". There are few references to research relating to programs that cater exclusively for students who are suspended from school.

A few programs which have been described in the literature are voluntary programs that offer support to students who have been suspended from school. One example includes the American Alternative to Suspension for Violent Behaviour Program for students who have been suspended from school owing to acts of violence and for the parents of these students (Breunlin et al., 2002, p. 351). Parents enrol themselves and their child in the program which operates off the school site with non-school staff. By participating in the program students can reduce the length of time of their school suspension and students return to school at the conclusion of the program. The program aims to reduce the major risk factors identified as leading to violence: "academic failure and poor attitude to school" and the "rate of re-suspension and disciplinary action taken against program participants" (Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2010 as cited in Breunlin et al., 2002, pp. 351-352). Breunlin et al. (2002) reported that follow up data was maintained on program participants and a review found that students who had participated in the program were "four times less likely to be re-suspended" for violent behaviour and received fewer other disciplinary infringements than did students who had been suspended for violent behaviour and had not participated in the program (p. 349). However, while these findings are significant, it is important to cite the delimitations Breunlin et al. (2002) noted relating to the program. These include that the program was trialled in a middle class area with a predominantly white population, making it difficult to generalise the positive findings to other socio-economic or cultural groups. Also, while the program identified the goal of avoiding academic failure for students accessing the program, academic or remediation programs were not integrated within the program.

Britain's *learning support units* are another example of a program described in the literature which offered support to students who had been suspended from school and which students entered into voluntarily. However, such units also support a broader range of students than just those who had been suspended from school. Learning support units are described as existing "… to keep disaffected pupils in school and working whilst they are addressing their behavioural problems, facilitating their re-integration into mainstream classes as soon as possible" (Excellence in Cities, 2006, para. 1).

Research in Britain describes that learning support units are a small number of units which are shared between two or three primary schools and cater to students who require particularly intensive support. In reviewing the literature relating to the units, it seems that they have some characteristics in common with the Department's suspension centres. Braun et al. (2002) described that the units aimed to get "children on the fringes of education back on track by equipping them with new skills and strategies that could be carried over, or

transferred, when they returned to full-time mainstream classes" (p. 4). The units followed the same curriculum as mainstream classes with a range of subjects including literacy, numeracy lessons, and information and communication technology. The units also included work on student behaviour issues and developing social skills, teaching students the skills and strategies that could be transferred to their mainstream schools (Braun, Xavier, & West, 2002, p. 5).

Positive outcomes were generally reported for students who had been placed at learning support units and for their mainstream schools. Positive student outcomes included "increased self-esteem and confidence, academic improvements, positive social and peer group impacts, and behaviour changes" as well as "improved attendance" (Braun, Xavier, & West, 2002, pp. 14 & 47). Positive outcomes reported in the literature across mainstream schools, in general, included that teachers appreciated the specialist knowledge and support of the learning support unit staff and their communication related to good classroom practices (Braun, Xavier, & West, 2002, p. 41).

Apart from such research in the United States of America and Britain there appears to be little other Australian or international research relating to supports that are similar to the NSW Department of Education and Communities' suspension centre model. While the literature describes many alternative education programs which cater to students with disruptive behaviour, the programs do not exclusively cater to students while they are suspended from school.

There has, however, been some relevant Australian research relating to effective practices in supporting students with disruptive behaviour. This research is useful to consider in scoping the characteristics of programs to enable successful outcomes for models of support such as suspension centres. Some characteristics of such programs include having proactive system-wide approaches to managing disruptive behaviour; a multi-level approach (that is, that the program is one part of a planned strategy to keep students involved in school); collaboratively developed school plans; appropriate curriculum to help avoid academic failure; positive strategies to manage behaviour, including functional based assessment; explicit instruction in proactive social skills for students including conflict resolution; ongoing training for staff in positive behaviour management; assessment of program effectiveness; support of parents; and the active and willing participation of the students (Conway in Foreman, 2001, pp. 311-354). More recently, research by Michail (2011) has supported such earlier research findings in stating that

a large volume of the literature supports a multi-sector approach to working with students with challenging behaviour. Strong links between school, community, and family are unmistakably one of the most fundamental and vital elements of the most promising programs (Collin & Law, 2001; Cowling, 2009; Massey et al., 2007; Partington, 2001) regardless of other strategies that are being utilised (Riordan, 2006). These links are said to increase student self esteem (Riordan, 2006) and even children considered these connections essential where students were in danger of being suspended, expelled or already had been excluded (Knipe et al., 2007). (p. 18)

Importantly, such researchers also note that other variables that need to be taken into account when developing any behaviour change or skill training program are that students need to "want to change" their behaviour and that they need to be actively involved in the process (Ashman & Conway, 1993, p. 130). Ashman & Conway (1993) also recommend that the change program "occur within the teaching-learning context" if new behaviours are to be integrated into the students' behaviour repertoire (Ashman & Conway, 1993, p. 130).

The literature clearly indicates that educators nationally and internationally recognise the importance of addressing issues relating to students' behaviour. It also indicates that while some education systems have set up different models to cater for specific student

needs, suspension centres established in NSW are unique in providing support exclusively for students who have been suspended from school.

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative research and aimed to provide descriptive information. As suspension centres are a unique resource world-wide, the intention of this research was not to add breadth to any existing knowledge, but rather, find new knowledge from the people (stakeholders) who had most involvement with the establishment and operation of the centres. As such, the methodology needed to ensure that this research was 'open' to what emerged from stakeholders. In this way, the researcher aimed to establish, from stakeholders perspectives, what was happening day-to-day in the centres; what they thought was working well; what needed to be improved and whether the centres were meeting the 'Goals' and 'Purpose', as a basis to compare practices in the centres to the Guidelines (policy) designed for their establishment and operation. In establishing the differences between "espoused educational policy" and "policy in use", it was assumed that it was the community the suspension centres service that could provide information on what is real or useful knowledge. Therefore, the methodological framework aimed to provide descriptive information by using a qualitative approach with a variety of stakeholders to generate rich qualitative data (Pirrie, Macleod, Cullen, & McCluskey, 2009, p. 3).

As a result, this research could form the basis for more substantial research related to suspension centres and support for disruptive student behaviour in schools. It could also inform future directions for suspension centres as a new resource.

Sample and Participants

The 22 suspension centres across the state are located in buildings separate from mainstream classrooms in a mixture of metropolitan, non-metropolitan and rural areas. Of the 22 centres, 11 centres are located on the sites of mainstream schools and the other 11 centres are located on, or co-located with, the sites of other specialist behaviour support services for students in government schools such as behaviour schools or tutorial centres and programs (five out of the 11 centres) or other services such as Police Citizens Youth Clubs or community centres (six out of the 11 centres). For the purpose of this research, random selection ensured representation of all of the different types of centres operating.

Survey Instruments and Stakeholders Involved

As this research encompassed a large state government organisation with a variety of different stakeholders, the ways in which descriptive data was gathered was instrumental in providing rich and meaningful information.

Semi-structured survey interviews were used with groups of stakeholders while students were attending the centres. They were students accessing the suspension centres; their parents; head teachers and teachers aides of the centres; and regional management committee members. The regional management committee members included school education directors; student support coordinators; student services officers; community representatives; and principals.

The interviews aimed to provide descriptive information relating to three research

sub-questions. The questions, therefore, aimed to establish, from stakeholders' perspectives, what were the best things happening or what should be maintained (sub-question one), what things needed to be improved in the suspension centres (sub-question two), and any evidence that the centres were meeting the Purpose and Goals as outlined in the Guidelines (sub-question three) (Cherry, 2010). As such, the questions were designed to invite stakeholders to share their thoughts and opinions relating to four key focus areas.

- Focus area question one: Background/context questions including what stakeholders thought students spent most time on at the centre and whether they were able to comment on changes in students' behaviour over the period of time they attended the centre.

- Focus area question two: What is currently happening at the suspension centre? This included referral to the centre, day-to-day activities in the centre, outcomes for students and transition back to school.

- Focus area question three: What are the best things that are happening or what things should be maintained with suspension centres?

- Focus area question four: What things need to be improved with suspension centres?

Figure 2 identifies the numbers of stakeholders with whom semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Semi-structured survey interviews
Four stakeholder groups (excluding mentors) were asked questions
focusing on key themes while students were placed at suspension centres.

71 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following groups of
key stakeholders.

i. 22 students placed at the centres
     - 12 high school; and
     - 10 primary school.

ii. 14 parents of the students who were placed at the centres
     - nine high school; and
     - five primary school.

iii. Seven head teachers and eight teachers aides of suspension centres

iv. 20 Regional management committee members
     - five school education directors;
     - five student support coordinators, student counselling and
      welfare;
     - four student services officers;
     - five principals of managing schools; and
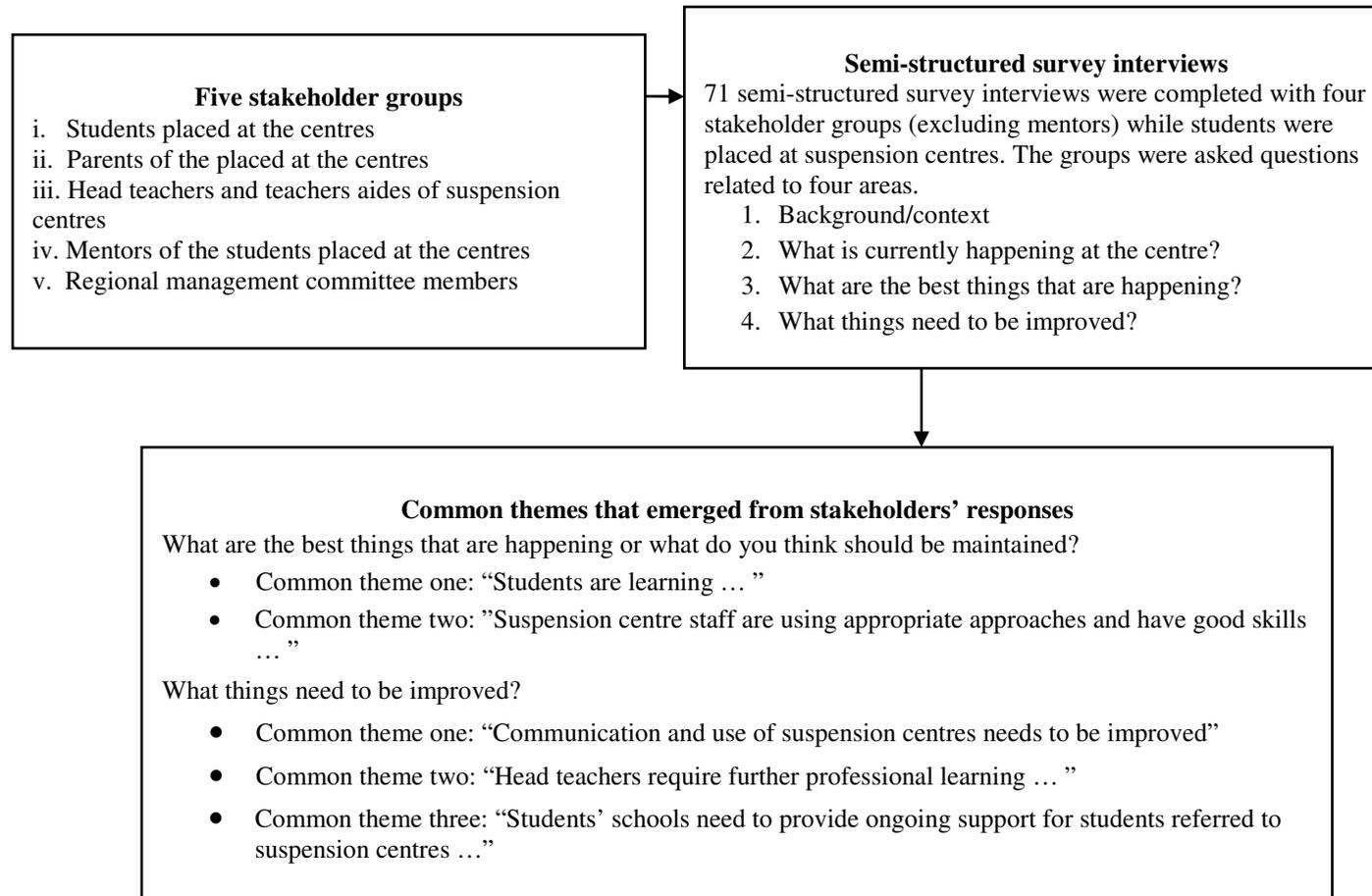   - one community representative.

Figure 2: Research, Survey Instruments and Stakeholders Involved

Analytical Tools

The responses to the research questions were analysed in two ways. First, stakeholders' responses were compiled and thoroughly examined to enable the responses to be grouped according to common themes or responses that emerged. In order to make meaning of stakeholders' responses, the common themes were then reviewed and further examined to reveal significant storylines associated with each theme. The storylines were derived from the most common descriptions and explanations of stakeholders' responses related to each common theme. As such, the storylines gave meaning to the common themes and further described what a significant number of stakeholders thought was working well or what should be maintained with suspension centres, and what things needed to be improved. (Bruner, 1990 as cited in Harrington, 2006, p. 102).

Further exploring the common themes and their associated storylines helped to identify the enabling and inhibiting factors for the success of the centres from stakeholders' perspectives. In turn, comparing stakeholders' responses to the suspension centre Guidelines enabled some understanding of the differences between "espoused educational policy" and "policy in use" (Cohen, 2000; Schön, 1995).

A diagrammatic representation of the stakeholder groups involved, survey instruments, questions, and emerging common themes or categories of responses for this research is outlined at Figure 3.

Five stakeholder groups

i.   Students placed at the centres
ii. Parents of the placed at the centres
iii. Head teachers and teachers aides of suspension centres
iv. Mentors of the students placed at the centres
v.   Regional management committee members

Semi-structured survey interviews

71 semi-structured survey interviews were completed with four stakeholder groups (excluding mentors) while students were placed at suspension centres. The groups were asked questions related to four areas.

1. Background/context
2. What is currently happening at the centre?
3. What are the best things that are happening?
4. What things need to be improved?

Common themes that emerged from stakeholders' responses

What are the best things that are happening or what do you think should be maintained?

- Common theme one: "Students are learning … "
- Common theme two: "Suspension centre staff are using appropriate approaches and have good skills … "

What things need to be improved?

- Common theme one: "Communication and use of suspension centres needs to be improved"
- Common theme two: "Head teachers require further professional learning … "
- Common theme three: "Students' schools need to provide ongoing support for students referred to suspension centres …"

Figure 3: Stakeholders, Survey Instruments, Questions and Emerging Themes

Results and Discussion

In analysing responses to the semi-structured interviews common themes and associated storylines were revealed which best described from stakeholders' perspectives what were the best things happening or what should be maintained, and what things needed to be improved with suspension centres. Comparing responses to the Guidelines and associated research helped to identify what might be the enabling and inhibiting factors for the success of the centres. It also helped to identify whether the centres were meeting the Purpose and Goals as outlined in the Guidelines.

Two common themes were revealed from responses to the question: "What are the best things happening or what should be maintained with suspension centres?" (Harrington, 2006, p. 104). The common themes were:

– "students are learning …"; and
– "suspension centre staff are using appropriate approaches and have good skills …".

Three common themes were identified from stakeholders' responses to the question: "What things need to be improved with suspension centres?". The common themes were

– "communication and use of suspension centres needs to be improved";
– "head teachers require further professional learning …"; and
– "students' schools need to provide ongoing support for students who are referred to suspension centres …".

These common themes and the associated storylines revealed in stakeholders' responses are described in further detail below.

Question One: "What are the best things happening or what should be maintained?"

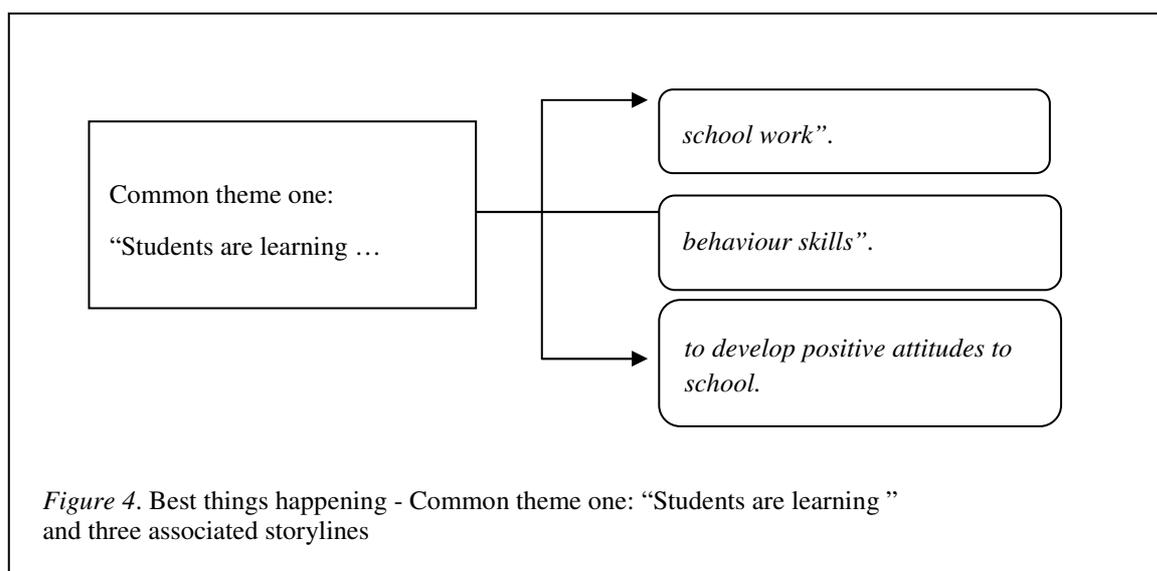*Common Theme One: "Students are learning …"*

Figure 4. Best things happening - Common theme one: "Students are learning "
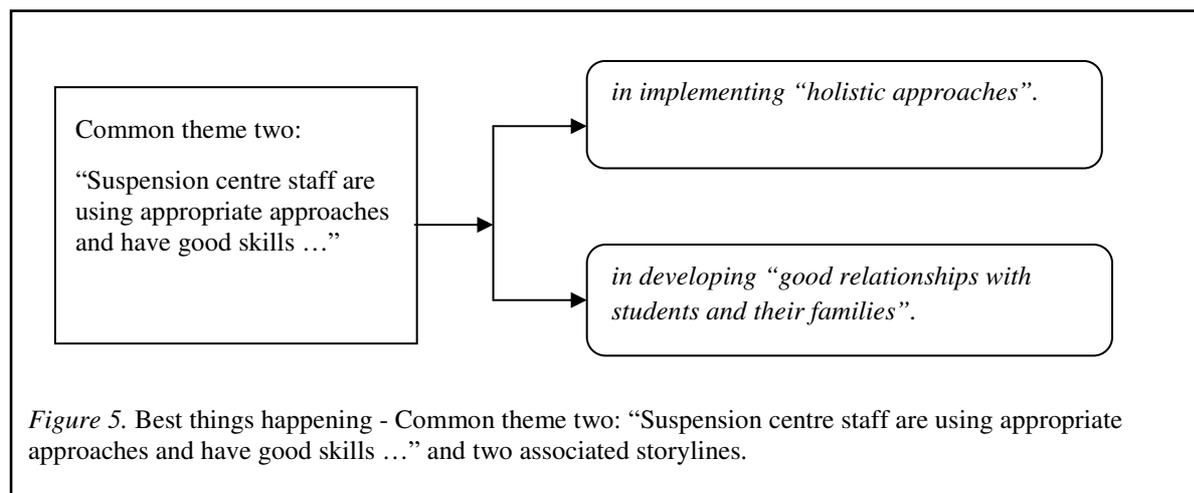and three associated storylines

Figure 4: Common Theme One and Three Associated Storylines

In response to the question: "What are the best things happening or what should be maintained with suspension centres?", common theme one: "Students are learning …" revealed that a range of stakeholders, across the majority of the centres, thought that students were being helped with and/or were learning skills relating to academic activities and that they were being taught and/or were learning behaviour skills. Students, suspension centre staff, and a principal commented on positive changes in students' behaviour, which many attributed to the behaviour skills students were taught and practised at suspension centres. Researchers such as Visser (2004) support stakeholders' descriptions that students were being taught and/or were learning behaviour skills as significant in helping to modify inappropriate student behaviours.

Stakeholders also stated that students were attending school regularly; were happier at school; succeeding with school work; and had improved self esteem and coping skills after returning to their schools from the centres. Such comments may reflect that students had developed positive attitudes to school. Parents and a teachers aide also commented that, unlike traditional forms of suspension from school, students had a place to go that was still connected to education. These things appeared to be enabling factors for the success of the centres.

In comparing policy and practice, the responses revealed that the centres assisted the majority of students to reflect on their behaviour; develop appropriate attitudes and behaviours; and build capacity and understanding on how to reengage at school and reintegrate to positive work habits (Suspension Centre Guidelines, 2006, para. 4). Students were also "assisted to make a successful re-entry to schooling (Suspension Centre Guidelines, 2006, para. 2). However, some caution is necessary because this research was not designed to determine whether the impact of what students gained at suspension centres was sustained over a long period of time after their placements at the centres had concluded. Therefore, stakeholders' comments in this phase of the research, at best, reflected that suspension centres assisted students to "successfully return to schooling" (Suspension Centre Guidelines, 2006, para. 1). A more thorough investigation of the variables associated with students' successful return to school and over a longer period of time, would be of benefit. This would help in determining whether the positive academic and behaviour outcomes for students were sustained after students had left the centres. This is important, as research identifies that one of the enabling factors for the success of the centres could be whether the successful behaviour and learning interventions established for students at suspension centres are seen and sustained in different contexts, such as students' schools or homes (Landrum & McDuffie, 2008; Mayer, 2008; Braun, Xavier, & West, 2002).

Common Theme Two: "Suspension centre staff are using appropriate approaches and have good skills ..."

Figure 5. Best things happening - Common theme two: "Suspension centre staff are using appropriate approaches and have good skills ..." and two associated storylines.

Figure 5: Common Theme Two and Two Associated Storylines

Common theme two: "Suspension centre staff are using appropriate approaches and have good skills ..." reflected that all stakeholder groups across the majority of centres reported that suspension centre staff, in particular head teachers, were using appropriate approaches and had good skills in managing students with disruptive behaviour. Stakeholders also noted the good relationships head teachers and some teachers aides had developed with a variety of people associated with the centres, particularly with students and their families. Some regional management committee members also commented on the positive relationships head teachers had developed with schools and their school communities. Such practices appeared to be important in enabling the Purpose and Goals outlined in the Guidelines (paras. 2 & 4) to be met. Some researchers cite the importance of providing effective support to students with disruptive behaviour by building, "high-quality relationships with teachers" or between young people and other adults (Silver 2005 as cited in Jerome & Pianta, 2008, para. 37). However, the extent to which the positive relationships with suspension centre staff assisted students to develop positive relationships with "educational figures", such as teachers in their schools, was less clear.

All stakeholders groups across the six centres, particularly students and their parents also commented on the good skills of head teachers and their implementation of strategies and practices to support students and their families. This included the provision of relevant information to students' schools relating to the management of students' behaviour and/or learning and the provision of skills development for the parents and teachers of the students. Stakeholders described the holistic approaches used in seeking additional support and/or providing relevant information to assist students and their families. Such findings are clearly of interest to this research as such practices were outlined in the Goals of the Guidelines and appeared to be one of the enabling factors for the success of the centres. However, while comments revealed that practices in suspension centres enabled some of the Purpose and Goals outlined in the Guidelines to be met in the short-term, another factor is whether students can sustain the skills learnt at suspension centres in their schools successfully over a longer period of time.

Researchers such as Jerome and Pinta (2008) also caution that it is a difficult task to expect that student-teacher relationships will necessarily improve in mainstream schools as a

result of students accessing alternative programs or supports. This is especially true, as the researchers say that "children who enter school with more behavioural problems are more likely to experience relationships with teachers that have high levels of conflict" (Jerome & Pianta, 2008, para. 10). Such findings are clearly of interest to this research. While stakeholders' comments revealed that practices in suspension centres enabled some of the Purpose and Goals outlined in the Guidelines to be met, another question, which was raised earlier, is whether students can successfully sustain the skills learnt at suspension centres in their school environments over a longer period of time. The fact that research reveals that teachers can have difficult relationships with students with disruptive behaviour clearly has implications for students successfully transferring the skills they learned at suspension centres to their school environments and in sustaining the skills learnt over a longer period of time after their suspension centre placements concluded.

Question Three: "What things need to be improved?"

Common Theme One: "Communication and use of suspension centres needs to be improved"

Figure 6. Needs to be improved - Common theme one: "Communication and use of suspension centres needs to be improved".
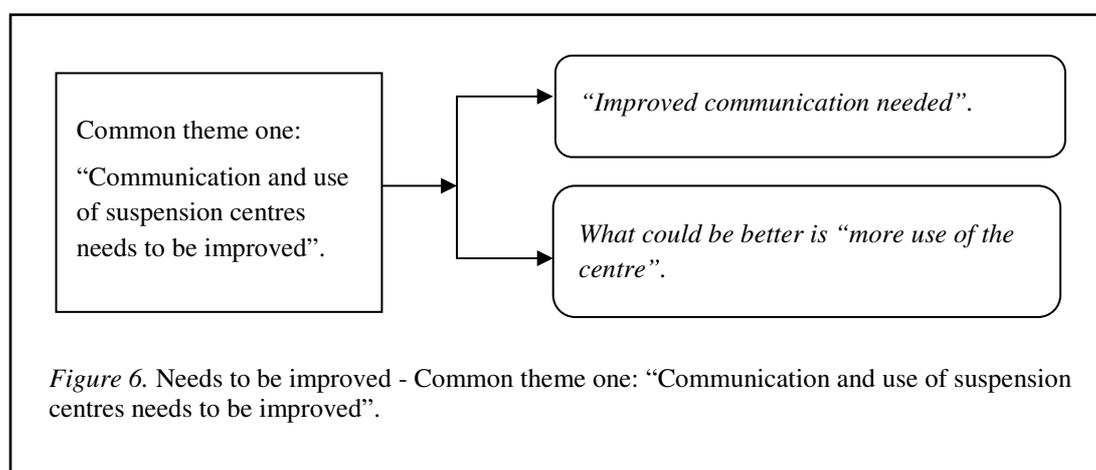
Figure 6: Common Theme One and Two Associated Storylines

In responses to the question: "What things need to be improved with suspension centres?", common theme one: "Communication and use of suspension centres needs to be improved" was revealed from stakeholders' comments. Head teachers thought that there needed to be improved communication to schools, relating to the purpose of suspension centres. Head teachers and members of regional management committees also said that improved communication was needed between regional and state office personnel and suspension centre staff to discuss and clarify issues and to monitor the progress of the centres. Some also raised issues related to monitoring the progress of the centres.

Information related to monitoring and evaluation were not specified in the Guidelines. Other researchers, however, cited these as important in measuring effectiveness, assisting with planning and in identifying and addressing issues as they arise (Braun, Xavier, & West, 2002, p. 26).

Some stakeholders felt that regular meetings between persons responsible for running, overseeing, or managing suspension centres could help in understanding and resolving some of the issues raised by stakeholders. At one centre, for example, the student services officer and head teacher commented on the fact that increased communication to schools had corrected misconceptions relating to the purpose of suspension centres. Comments from two student services officers at two centres also revealed that regular communication within the

forum of management committees might enable such issues to be addressed and provide a means of monitoring and evaluating the centres. It would be useful to ascertain whether management committees have functioned and how they have functioned across suspension centres. This could have implications for the Guidelines. It might be, for example, that the Guidelines need to define more clearly the role of management committees to better facilitate the success of the centres.

Some stakeholders in rural locations thought that primary school students needed to access suspension centres, citing the benefits of intervening when students were younger. Researchers also identify the importance of intervening early to address disruptive student behaviour (Riordan, 2006; Rogers, 2004) and at a time when families are "more receptive to interventions" (Tilling, 2008, p. 6). The Guidelines do not specify an age limit for students and there would be some benefit in establishing why most of the centres were not catering to primary school students. Some stakeholders revealed that there were sometimes few students in some centres and that one centre was implementing practices that were not in the Guidelines in catering to students on the "verge of suspension". Identifying the outcomes of such practices would be useful in ascertaining whether the practices led to successful outcomes for students, schools, and school communities.

Common Theme Two: "Head teachers require further professional learning …"

Figure 7. Needs to be improved - Common theme two: "Head teachers require further professional learning …" and associated storyline.
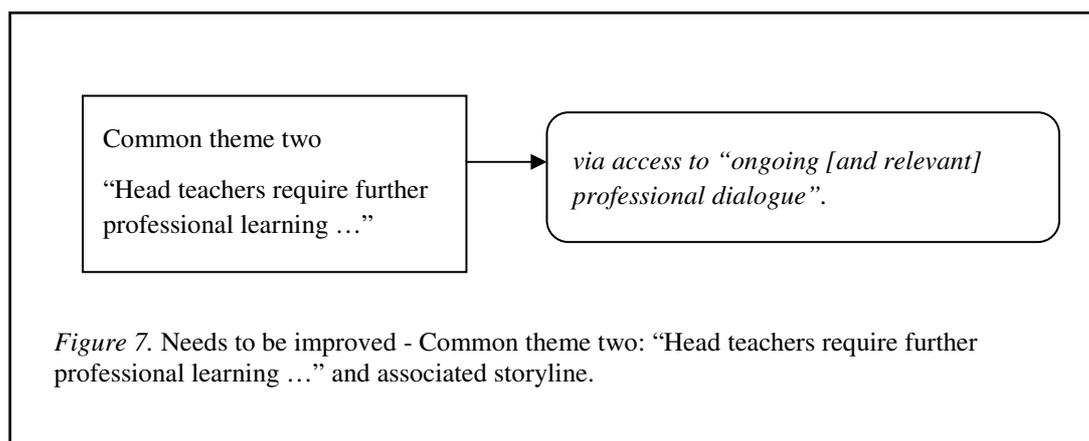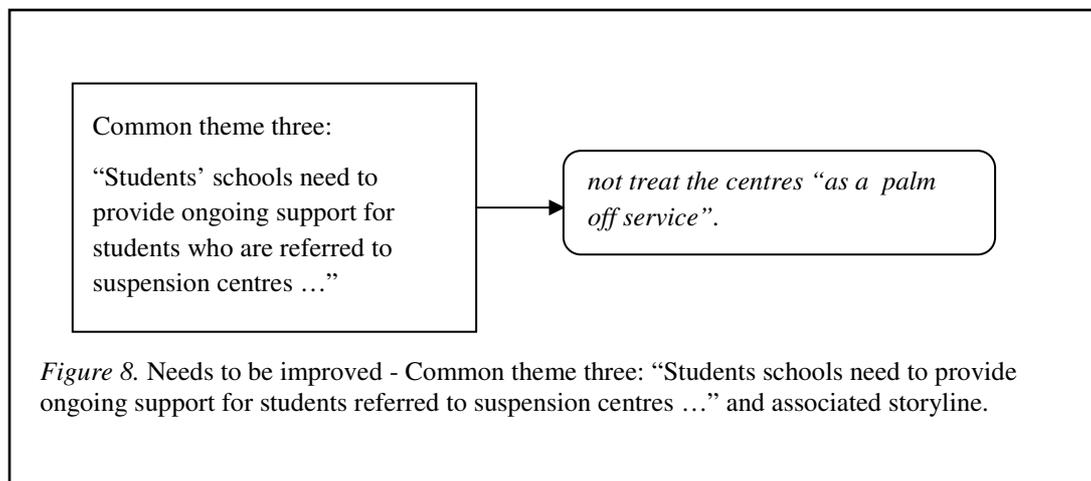
Figure 7: Common Theme Two and Associated Storyline

In relation to common theme two: "Head teachers require further professional learning …" regional management committee members and head teachers across the majority of the centres commented on the need to cater effectively for the unique and often isolated role of head teachers. Head teachers and student services officers identified that head teachers required further professional learning ranging from having the head teachers in regions meeting "a couple of times a term" with "involvement from other regional and school personnel", to state office bringing the head teachers together to "share research and resources". The Guidelines did not directly refer to professional learning. However, "management committees" as outlined in the Guidelines might be one means of establishing stakeholders' needs more clearly and ensuring that strategies are put in place to cater to those needs.

While research establishes the importance of professional learning for teachers (Hirsh & Hord, 2008; Kennedy, 2008) some difficulties were cited by stakeholders that may need to be addressed. This included that head teachers applying for more senior positions in schools

had been unsuccessful because they felt that personnel recruiting for the positions viewed the head teacher suspension centre role as being very "limited".

Common Theme Three: "Students' schools need to provide ongoing support for students who are referred to suspension centres …"

Common theme three:

"Students' schools need to provide ongoing support for students who are referred to suspension centres …"

→ not treat the centres "as a palm off service".

Figure 8. Needs to be improved - Common theme three: "Students schools need to provide ongoing support for students referred to suspension centres …" and associated storyline.

Figure 8: Common Theme Three and Associated Storyline

In common theme three: "Students' schools need to provide ongoing support for students who are referred to suspension centres …" a number of stakeholders' thought that schools needed to provide ongoing support to students who were referred to suspension centres, including providing timely and meaningful learning programs for students when they were referred to the centres. Head teachers said that they often spent time unsuccessfully chasing up work or information from students' schools. One of the areas of concern was the lack of information relating to risk assessments that had been requested for students with special needs and students with "high behaviour problems" who had been referred to the centres. Another issue revealed by suspension centre staff was that schools needed to maintain some contact and ongoing responsibility for students while they were at suspension centres. Parents, teachers aides, and head teachers also commented on the lack of support provided by students' schools for students when they returned to their schools, with head teachers in almost all of the centres commenting on the difficulties associated with mentoring in supporting the students return to school.

That the "mentoring" component of the Guidelines was problematic may be an inhibiting factor for the centres in successfully returning students to their schools post suspension centres. Therefore, although it is beyond the scope of this research, it would be useful to identify more clearly how the positive gains established for students at suspension centres are sustained when students return to their schools. Stakeholders commented on the ongoing support provided by suspension centre staff to students when they returned to school. However, other literature clearly establishes the importance of students' schools actively supporting students to maintain such positive gains and the importance of supporting students via broader and more sustainable supports (Braun, Xavier, & West, 2002; Riordan, 2006).

Practices of some schools were not reflective of the Purpose and Goals outlined in the suspension centre Guidelines (2006) and as such the practices appeared to be inhibiting factors in "successfully returning students to school" (para. 2). Researchers such as Riordan (2006, p. 245) clearly support the need for students with disruptive behaviour to be engaged in meaningful learning and academic programs to increase the likelihood that they will be successfully engaged at school. To enable student success at school, researchers have noted

the importance of the development of successful reintegration plans for students who have been suspended from school, to ensure that they can engage with school and to help prevent the recurrence of disruptive behaviour (Rogers, 2004; Riordan, 2006).

Finally, of the 22 students who took part in the semi-structured survey interviews, only two commented on things they thought needed to be improved with the centres.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

In outlining "the differences between 'espoused educational policy' and 'policy in use' in relation to suspension centres" (Cohen, 2000; Schön, 1995) stakeholders' responses identified practices that appeared to be enabling or inhibiting factors for the success of suspension centres. In discussing the implications of stakeholders' responses, in light of related research, some clear directions were provided, as a result of this research. The following recommendations are outlined for practice and research to best enable the success of suspension centres.

Recommendations for Research

Recommendation 1

That the Department of Education and Communities devise a mechanism for policy and practice to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of suspension centre practices.
Stakeholders' responses revealed the need for some structure for monitoring and evaluating suspension centres and research supports the importance of this in identifying the effectiveness of programs that aim to assist in improving student behaviour.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendation 2

That a range of practices need to be implemented to support the professional learning needs of suspension centre staff.
This research found that suspension centre staff were using appropriate approaches and had good skills in managing students with disruptive behaviour. Providing a range of opportunities for suspension centre staff to share good strategies and practices would be beneficial. Such practices would support suspension centre staff in what was described as their "unique and often isolated roles" as well as help to disseminate effective practice for this relatively new model of support for students with disruptive behaviour.

Recommendation 3

That the Department of Education and Communities explore the role of mentoring in supporting students' successful transition from suspension centres to their schools.
Stakeholders revealed that mentors were "difficult to find" for students and that the "mentoring" practices adopted in suspension centres were not always effective. It was also described that schools needed to provide ongoing support for students placed at suspension centres to facilitate the success of the centres. To support students to make a successful transition back to their schools, it would be beneficial to scope the ways in which centres

have implemented mentoring practices; the barriers to successful implementation; and alternative strategies that may have been successfully implemented to support students.

Recommendation 4

That practices should be implemented to facilitate more effective and regular communication between schools, suspension centres, regional support staff, and state office staff who oversee suspension centres.

Stakeholders identified that communication needed to be improved between suspension centres; schools; regional personnel; and state office personnel to enable issues to be identified and addressed.

Recommendation 5

The Department of Education and Communities should explore how suspension centres are meeting the needs of particular groups of students.

Stakeholders' responses revealed that they thought more primary school students needed to access the centres; that sometimes there was under-utilisation of some centres in comparison to the number of students actually suspended from relevant schools; and that the centres needed to do more to support particular groups of students and their families, such as Aboriginal students.

It would be useful to explore why suspension centres predominantly catered to high school students, why there were few students in some centres, at specific times, and the composition of students referred to the centres. This might have implications for the types of professional learning and support provided to suspension centre staff to ensure that strategies and practices are put in place to provide the best support for particular groups of students placed at suspension centres.

Limitations of the Research and Cautions

Qualitative research has long been associated with concerns related to validity and interpretation (Clough, 1992; Groundwater-Smith, 2004). In this research, as with other qualitative research, there is the possibility that aspects of data completion and the data collection method might have inadvertently affected the research validity. In minimising such constraints on this research, I was mindful of establishing a trusting relationship with stakeholders prior to conducting the interviews and was sensitive in asking clarifying questions relating to stakeholders' responses.

Some caution is necessary relating to generalising the findings in this research more broadly as the Guidelines present some flexibility in how the centres can be established and operated. Also, the centres will mostly likely evolve and change over time and it is important to recognise that the findings in this research reflect practices at a particular point in time and may not therefore, be relevant over a longer period of time.

This research was intended to provide descriptive information on how suspension centres were operating, from the perspectives of stakeholders, as a basis to compare policy to practice. The aim was to identify stakeholders perspectives on what was happening day-to-day in the centres; what stakeholders thought was working well; what needed to be improved and whether the centres were meeting the 'Goals' and 'Purpose', and compare responses to the Guidelines established for their operation, to generate new and useful knowledge, as a basis for further rigorous research in this area.

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