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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide teachers' perspectives on issues raised by the quantitative analyses. Twenty-nine teachers participated in five focus group sessions conducted during October 2008. The teachers were drawn from seven primary schools, three senior high schools and two education support centres. The method of convening the focus groups has been described in Chapter 4.

The teachers were presented with the preliminary findings, based on data gathered in the first three years of the study. They were asked to comment on data aggregated for all schools participating in the study.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for teachers who had reported on their students during the study to provide a commentary on early results. This commentary has been summarised around four key areas:

1. Influences on student behaviour;
2. Teacher and student interactions;
3. Pedagogy and curriculum; and
4. Students with additional learning needs.

Discussions were informal and often animated. Generally, more than one teacher from each school was present and, in many cases, more than one teacher had taught a student or class group under discussion. As a result, there was a tendency for speakers to add to each other's accounts during the telling. Square brackets have been used to show the utterances of additional speakers.

Out-of-school factors

Social change

Teachers reported that student behaviour in schools is more of a problem than it used to be, and that there are many factors contributing to this trend that are outside their control.

... what I'm finding is the behaviour is really an issue nowadays. It's increasingly an issue. I've noticed it over the last ten years or so. There's been a change in behaviours and I think it's not just kids. I think kids reflect what's going on outside, definitely (senior high school English teacher, FG 2, 45).

Teachers attributed some of the problems to shifting values about acceptable behaviour communicated through the media.

A few years ago I noticed that they were swearing on the radio. [Yeah, they do that a lot now.] That didn't happen when I was a kid. [Yeah.] [Stickers on cars with swearing.] Yes. So everything is so much more acceptable and we're becoming desensitised to it all. [Yes.] And then it's okay (primary school teacher, FG1, 127).

English teachers complained that students now confused invective with expressiveness.

Technological changes that teachers frequently referred to were: the use of mobile phones and computer games, and the frequency with which children have access to their own computers and televisions in their bedrooms.

Teachers also referred to the increasingly high levels of drug use and alcohol abuse.
I think, from my own experience this year and probably last year, a lot of the children's behaviour comes from the problems that are going on in the family. And much of it's out of our control. I think we have to accept that there's mental illness in children that we've never seen before. [Oh, yeah.] I think there's drug abuse. I believe myself the impact of drugs in society is coming into education. I think we have a lot of children who are being born to drug-addicted parents or people dabbling in dope. [It's around them all the time.] Alcohol. This is a huge picture yet no one ever gets up and says it. But we are teaching the children of the hippy, drug society who smoke dope and think: 'It's not going to hurt anyone, you know, it's quite harmless'. [Yeah.] Well, I tell you it does. When it goes on in families there's abuse in families, there's drug use in families, parents are in prison. [Every class has one.] I find these poor little souls are not only my worst behaviour problems but they are the ones who are sitting on the bottom of the rung (primary school teacher, FG 1, 109).

Other teachers also reported that children burdened by substance abuse in their homes were likely to be absent or late and, when they did attend, they were often tired.

The observations of the participants in the focus group discussions about these social changes illustrated how the task of persuading children to accept standards of behaviour necessary for the good order of a school has become more difficult. The widespread exposure of young children to adult television, computer games, the internet and magazines means that inappropriate language and behaviour are being modelled for them. Children and adolescents may learn, for example, that aggressive behaviour is an acceptable way of solving problems; that intoxication is normal; that self-interest trumps legitimate authority; that tasks that become too hard can be ended by the flick of a switch; and that only 'nerds' are compliant and try hard to succeed at school.

Child-rearing practices

Teachers reported problems with the way parents and children interact, in particular, problems they experience when managing children who have not been disciplined at home. This factor emerged in interviews with teachers and the case studies of individual students.

Many parents, according to the focus group teachers, struggled to apply 'tough love'. 'They want to be their best friend' a teacher explained. Parents find it difficult to say 'No' to either young children or teenagers. One of the teachers observed this now to be a common feature of contemporary parenting and not necessarily a sign of neglect:

You know a lot of parents are good parents ... like the mother of the child in my class I just mentioned. She loves him, she gives him money, she buys him things, she cooks for him, she listens to his reading and she makes sure that he's safe – he's not neglected. But she doesn't know that she has to teach him morals or she don't know how to teach morals. They are doing all of the things that they think (emphasis added) is good parenting but they are not engaging in the hard stuff like saying, 'No'. And they're not setting boundaries (primary school teacher, FG 3, 61).

The tone was not one of blame. Teachers recognised the dilemma facing parents, indicating they had similar experiences in raising their own children.

A primary school deputy principal linked this style of parenting with other social trends.

A lot of it is a conscience thing. The parents are going off to work and they're buying the kids' love because they're not there when they get home from school. They're not there on the weekend. Or mum and dad want to go off to the pub or whatever so, 'Here's $50. Go and buy yourself a pie or spend it on whatever you like' (primary school deputy principal, FG 3, 55).

Teachers discussed the kinds of options available to parents to sanction their children, such as sending a child to his or her bedroom in response to an act of unacceptable misbehaviour. They saw this as a sound strategy not unlike the strategies they use to sanction problem classroom behaviour. However, they observed that the bedroom may no longer be a quiet place for reflection as so many children have their own television, computer games and internet access in their bedrooms. While parents still send an uncooperative child to his or her bedroom, this serves only to remove the annoyance from the parent and to reinforce the influence of the electronic media; it does not serve as a sanction and it is not instructive.
Teachers gave many examples of individual students whose parents, in their view, failed to provide their children with adequate care to enable them to function in a classroom. Examples included children who were physically and emotionally neglected; those from a young age were required to take on parenting roles for younger siblings; those caught up in conflicts between divorced and separating parents; children with parents who expected the school to discipline their children when they would not; and parents who failed, in teachers' opinion, to recognise the value of schooling. It was the view of teachers that societal influences have changed relations between students and parents, and that the net effect of these influences has resulted in schools being confronted with a significant proportion of children who have never been effectively disciplined prior to their commencing school.

A teacher pointed out the importance of parents' attitudes to learning.

There is definitely a clear correlation between the students who cannot do the work and behaviour. I would like to draw it back to their home environment because, after meeting some of the parents at the parent-teacher meetings, you can clearly see those parents who are interested in their children's school work. Those kids try hard at school, even if they can’t do it. Even low achievers would still try and they would still ask. But then you’ve got the kids whose parents are not involved. The kids go home and they play X-box the whole day. You can just pick them up from their clothes as well as from the food they eat at recess and lunch. And they are the kids who are not interested in anything in your class. They can’t do it first of all, but they don’t want to try either, because they don’t get encouraged at home to try. What really frustrates me is that they are more than happy to sit in lesson after lesson after lesson and learn nothing (senior high school maths teacher, FG 4, 8).

Teachers were disparaging of some of the agencies because it appeared they were only prepared to become involved in extreme cases, namely, students about whom there was clear evidence of physical or sexual abuse. Teachers were also critical of the high staff turnover in these agencies and the fact that case workers had rarely met the children who were on their case loads.

### Teacher and student interactions

#### Expectations

In previous chapters, reference was made to the phenomenon of ‘easy riding’ where difficult students were able to ‘negotiate’ with their teachers an agreement to behave in a reasonable manner in return for a lower level of academic output. Teachers are constantly having to make judgments about the weight of pressure that they are prepared to apply to students: excessive pressure can push students beyond a threshold of acceptable classroom behaviour. On the other hand, too little pressure can lead to complete disengagement.

Teachers discussed the strategies they used to shape classroom behaviour and engage students in academic work. They claimed successful teaching requires much more coaxing, persuading and negotiating than was the case in the past. They talked about ‘the language of choice’ that they saw providing a framework for enlisting student cooperation. Their emphasis was very much on being positive.

Part of our job is to actually teach the children to have positive expectations and try to support the parents to have positive expectations for their children. And I think every child would like to be able to learn and succeed at school but not every child feels supported and able to learn at school (senior high school deputy principal, FG 2, 85).

Even with the most challenging students, there was a reluctance to admonish directly a student who was behaving inappropriately thereby expecting an immediate, positive response. For example, a teacher referred to a student whose behaviour had continued to be a problem throughout the school year.

I’ll try never to push her in a corner. You always sit there and work it out and listen to her side and be fair. I think if you don’t behave like that you shouldn’t really be teaching. Because you’re still trying to help children, aren’t you? You just hope that maybe, your little words of wisdom or your helping might turn her slightly. And they might (primary school teacher, interview 14, 16).

In tandem with the reliance on negotiation and coaxing, teachers have instituted systems of rewards to elicit appropriate responses from students. It is also now commonly
the case that students expect to be rewarded for cooperation. Teachers reported that students' expectations about their entitlement to rewards have increased generally.

Kids get instant gratification these days. It's got to happen now with bells and whistles and if it's missing the kids say: 'Not interested' [primary school teacher, FG 1, 139].

They described rewards that were usefully embedded in learning tasks and those which intruded on instruction. One teacher gave the following example of how she used rewards to promote engagement:

In my Year 9 class, I get them working on a task and I say, 'Okay, if you show me your draft, I'll let you go on the computer' and my better kids are up there and they're producing really good work (senior high school English teacher, FG 2, 63).

However, the use of rewards can be excessive as a teacher pointed out. For example, another teacher described an interaction with a boy to whom she had been teaching spelling on the day of the focus group. The boy had successfully matched two words and said: 'I won. What's my prize?' Don't I get a prize?' She said the group clapped and the boy was praised to which he responded, in disbelief, 'Is that my prize?'

Such expectations, teachers recognized, made it difficult for students to develop a love of learning or experience the satisfaction derived from the sense of achievement as its own reward.

**Modifying a class's behaviour**

Explicit reward systems were widely used by some teachers to modify class behaviour. One teacher who had had serious behaviour problems with her class described how a colleague had supported her to introduce a system of rewards designed to improve the behaviour of the whole class.

What we did was very much reward-based. We asked the children: 'What do you like?' and they came up with games. So we came up with a list of games. As soon as they got their 20 jellybeans on the board: 'Right, out for a game. Get our hats and out we go.' Almost every hour: reward, reward, reward. They weren't really jellybeans – that's what we called the marks on the board. And sometimes it could be every half hour. And I was concerned about the curriculum because I'm thinking they're out there playing games but the teacher who supported me assured me that after you get the behaviour under control the learning will take care of itself. And it really has because we're doing things now that I don't think we could have done in Term 2 (primary school teacher, FG 1, 94).

This teacher reported that she still had a problem with one child, and on occasions a second child, but both students responded to individualised strategies. The inattentive and disruptive behaviour of the class group was no longer unmanagable.

**Consequences**

Teachers talked about 'consequences' as part of a 'language of choice'. In this framework, sanctions are rarely imposed simply because a child has transgressed a rule. Rather, students are given choices and a sanction, generally referred to as a 'consequence', is the result of the child's choice. The child is represented as an active participant in the process through which the consequence is imposed.

Examples of consequences referred to in the focus group discussions were: relocation within the class, removal from class, being sent to the office, being escorted to the office, someone from the office coming to the classroom, detention, not being allowed to attend a school function or excursion and suspension. Generally parents were informed about the imposition of a consequence and asked to support the school.

The teacher who had used the formal system of rewards to modify her class's behaviour explained how she used rewards and consequences as compatible strategies.

The ones who were troublesome in my class were mainly the boys and if I could get them out playing a game they were quite happy. So it linked into that. At the end of the year there was one boy — I go: 'Okay, you've got a choice.' He says: 'Fine, then.' Before I could even give him the options, he knew he could do one thing and go to the office or do something else and it was to sit in the corner. And he knew that he wasn't going to get away with anything without having a consequence. So by the end of the year, he would cooperate (primary school teacher, FG 1, 140).
Teachers expected older students to exercise a greater degree of responsibility and regarded poor academic work as evidence that students lacked diligence. A high school teacher explained how he presented to his students the choices before them.

I expect students to be at a certain level with behaviour. I say to them: ‘If you choose not to work, I’m not going to force you to. If you’ve chosen not to work, that’s fine; you will fail, you won’t graduate, you won’t get a job. Put the work in and you’ll get rewarded. If you don’t, that’s fine, but if you mess up in my class, you’re out’ (senior high school mathematics teacher, FG 2, 55).

A high school teacher in a learning support role questioned whether all high school-age students have the maturity to accept responsibility for their choices.

Children muck up in class so I go into the Year 9 class to provide support. The teacher will time and time again give the students detentions and they don’t show up. They do not understand consequences. [I would agree with that.] They don’t understand that if you don’t do your homework you will not make progress (senior high school mathematics teacher, FG 4, 44).

While this teacher is presumably drawing from the experience of teaching low-achieving students, it was unclear from the discussion whether the ‘choice’ of academic failure ahead of the application of consistent effort was confined to such students.

**Negotiation**

The expectation that teachers coax and persuade students to make an effort implies that the burden falls equally on teacher and student. Students can take advantage of this by seeking to bargain about how little effort will be accepted.

A teacher explained how she tried to place pressure on students who were wasting class time.

I put some kids out of the class because they weren’t working. I sent them to a buddy class with some work to complete. They said: ‘What’s this for? Why would I go there?’ So I’ve gone through all the steps in our management code of practice and they’ll probably get a suspension. But they think I’m at fault, not them. They think I’m a mean teacher. So they actually see the staff as being at fault because we are expecting them to work (senior high school English teacher, FG 4, 45).

Expectations on the part of students that everything is negotiable make it very difficult for teachers to insist on high standards of work.

I think we get so overwhelmed and tired. I mean I didn’t chase some Year 9s up last term because I didn’t have a chance and now it’s worse because I’ve let them go. But I think it’s about everybody saying, ‘Right, I want a proper sentence. I want a paragraph. If you don’t do this, you do it again.’ Otherwise, it’s not going to happen. We need to be consistent and say that there needs to be this level of achievement. It’s about everybody having higher expectations (senior high school English teacher, FG 4, 63).

Many teachers in the focus groups talked about the issue of standards, in particular the need for higher standards. However, it is difficult to imagine how standards can be raised when transactions between teachers and students rely so heavily on a system in which so much is negotiable.

**Pedagogy and the curriculum**

**Student engagement with learning**

Teachers were asked during the focus group discussions whether they had students who were disengaged from learning. There were many descriptions of students whom teachers identified in this way.

What I notice in one of my English classes is that some of the low achieving boys are very quiet. They can switch off. They’ve learnt that if they’re quiet they don’t get into trouble and since I’ve rung home they are handing their work in but before that they were tending not to hand their work in. And they could switch off and they could go under the radar (senior high school, English teacher, FG 4, 3).

This teacher identified similar groups of students in other classes she teaches. She described attempts to engage students in a Year 11 class.

This year I did something so that most of them did engage but even so, two of them didn’t come to the party with the other kids. They didn’t finish the work off. They certainly didn’t want to sit the exam. They don’t want to do the written assignments. They don’t hand them in. They’re disorganised (senior high school, English teacher, FG 4, 5).
Primary school teachers also gave examples of disengaged students. One teacher recognised that disengagement was more of a problem in his current school than some others he had taught in.

One of the things that really strikes me about this school is the lack of motivation in the children. In my previous schools, kids would get excited and here they don’t. Kids would say, ‘That’s fantastic’ and ‘I want to find out stuff’ and bring things to school. They would embrace learning and go for it. We took the kids here on an excursion to the cultural centre and they really enjoyed it but there wasn’t a sense of excitement about a day out. (primary school teacher, FG 1, 135).

This teacher’s comment highlights the fact that disengagement is more of a problem in some communities. Teachers from one school said they thought that disengaged students were the exception.

A student may not like English or maths but you still try. If you talk to most of the kids, they are active in Cubs or sports or after-school activities. They go on holidays, do things with their families. Most of them value education and they want to do well (primary school teacher, FG 3, 66).

This scenario contrasts with that in another primary school. A teacher described the difficulties of teaching narrative writing in upper primary when students lack out-of-school experiences that support learning.

They can get to Year 5 and they haven’t had a visit to the zoo. [That’s right.] [Yeah.] [They haven’t been to Perth. They haven’t been on a train.] So it’s so much harder for those children who have had such little experience. They’ve got nothing to draw from. They don’t even go to the beach (primary school teacher, FG 1, 48).

These descriptions of disengagement are drawn from the examples teachers gave from their own classes. Teachers also described the strategies they used to engage specific students.

Two teachers described the case of a student who had been transformed into a switched-on member of the class. The teachers had taught this particular student in previous years. The student had also attended an after-school tutor group which the two teachers had taught collaboratively. The tutor group was an intervention for students identified as performing below benchmark standards. By their account, the investment in time and other resources was substantial, drawing on support additional to their own contributions.

Last year, he was one of those kids – you put writing in front of him and he would smash his head on the desk, ‘Huhhh! I’m not doing this!’ and ‘Why did you put that in front of me, you know I can’t read. Are you crazy?’ He wasn’t one of the violent kids or the really disruptive ones but it was the effort; you could not get him to do any piece of work (Year 3 teacher, last year, FG 1, 73).

This year he clicked. I can’t think exactly what it was but at one point he clicked. It was like he’s gone: ‘There’s all this really cool stuff out there that I can find out about and I have to be able to read and write to do it’. We’ve done everything by themes and he’s gone: ‘Volcanoes. They’re cool. They kill thousands of people, I want to know about it. So I want to read. I want to write about it’ (Year 4 teacher, this year, FG 1, 79).

The teachers explained that this Indigenous boy’s literacy had not improved greatly since his transformation but learning had become fun and ‘because his behaviour has improved a lot of “hangers-on” have followed his example’. He also made a pronouncement that after-school tutoring was ‘really cool’ reinforcing the idea that an extra hour of school was a benefit not a penalty.

The aggregated data presented to the teachers who participated in the focus groups reported differences between English and mathematics teachers and boys and girls. This prompted a number of discussions about differences in teaching and learning styles and the impact these have on student behaviour.

Generally, the focus group teachers agreed that in high schools there are fundamental differences in the teaching of English and mathematics. Their comments tended to corroborate the statistical evidence produced by the Pipeline analyses: unproductive behaviour is more likely to be a problem in English than mathematics classes.

A deputy principal gave an overview of the differences she observed in secondary school English and mathematics classrooms.
I see a lot more activity in English classrooms, there’s more movement around the room. There’s more of a sense of different students doing different work. There’s a more individual approach to student learning than I find in the bulk of the mathematics classrooms where they are generally working from the one program or the one text book and they do the same tests And they are often designated a particular seat and they have to stay there. So I find very, very different practices in the classrooms. And given the greater responsibility placed on students in English classrooms, I’m not surprised that the student behaviours there are identified as being a bit more problematic than where they don’t have that freedom of movement, freedom of choosing the work that they’re going to do, or how they’re going to present their work (senior high school deputy principal, FG 2, 44).

In primary schools, focus group teachers taught both English and mathematics; they also commented on differences between the teaching methods in the two learning areas.

Writing is not an easy fix. With maths you can pinpoint the problem a child’s having to give them strategies to remedy it but with writing – I don’t know whether it’s just the creative side of it – but it’s a lot harder to pinpoint exactly what it is and to fix it for want of a better word. The process is a lot different. [It’s a long process, isn’t it.] Yeah. [There’s lots of bits too, lots of things that come together.] Yeah. With maths you’ve just got a maths example. The process is quite quick and simple but if you’re writing a narrative the process is huge and there’s so many parts. You’ve got your sentences, your descriptive language, your punctuation, it’s sort of endless but with maths it’s a lot more specific (primary school teacher, FG 1, 40).

When describing differences in the way English and mathematics were taught, teachers were inclined to draw attention to the gender of students as a significant factor.

As they get into the upper primary school, I find it’s not that students don’t know the process and the structure; it’s more that boys just don’t want to do it. It’s a laborious task. And of course we expect more from them: half a page isn’t good enough in Year 7 whether you’re a boy or a girl and that’s where the inattentiveness and those kinds of behaviours are evident. They might just sit there and do nothing (primary school teacher, FG 1, 41).

A primary school teacher explained how these differences impacted on the behaviour of two students in her class.

I’ve had two extreme behaviour problems in my class: both of them there was no problem with maths because they were quite capable at maths. One of them wasn’t too bad at language but didn’t enjoy it. The other one is very weak where language skills are concerned and he just opts out straight away. You say the word ‘writing’ and he says; ‘I’m not going to do it’. But I don’t have problems with him in maths. He’s engaged, he’s motivated, he’s quite happy to do it. But he also has a high opinion of his maths ability and a very low opinion of his language ability so certainly the self-esteem comes into it as well (primary school teacher, FG 1, 37).

A number of explanations were given for gender difference. Primary school teachers agreed on the importance of what they called ‘hands-on’ learning strategies.

For boys, it’s so much easier when they’ve done it in a hands-on way. [You have to.] It’s so much easier for them to recall the information and write it down (primary school teacher, FG 1, 48).

As well as suiting the learning preferences of the boys, ‘hands-on’ strategies were presented as well-suited to teaching mathematics and science. An experienced Year 1 teacher reported gender differences in mathematics which she attributed to family support.

I find the boys in Year 1 generally brighter, quicker at mathematics. But do you know why? It’s the thing that fathers do with their boys now. Mothers do a lot of things with their kids and namby-pamby them but dads, when they spend quality time with their sons, teach them maths (primary school teacher, FG 3, 107).

There were other relevant factors but they tended to play out differently at the primary and secondary levels and in different schools. Some mathematics programs were organised around a single textbook but English programs were not. Also, there was a tendency for English to be taught to classes with wide variations in student ability and achievement, while mathematics classes tended to consist of students with similar levels of attainment.
The curriculum and pedagogy

No clear agreement about the impact of the curriculum on behaviour was evident, but individual teachers raised a range of issues.

A secondary maths teacher questioned the view that the problem of engagement is the result of the curriculum and its content.

I’ve heard it said that if the kid’s not interested, it’s the curriculum and you’ve got to make the curriculum more interesting. I think that’s a pile of rubbish. I really do. I’ve tried in maths putting practical subjects for some pretty low, bad kids and, yeah, they’re interested and we deal with cars, measuring pistons and cylinders and all this. It’s fabulous for a week but you can’t keep it going, you know. And it doesn’t matter what you try. Something new is okay for an hour and that’s it. So I don’t think disengagement is a result overall of the curriculum. I think for a lot of our students we find home factors. If we’ve got a kid who’s disengaged, disruptive or whatever else and I go along to the coordinator and say, ‘I’m having a problem with this kid’, the coordinator will say, ‘You should see the problems he’s got at home. I’ve been trying to contact parents, blah, blah, blah.’ So I think that is a lot of it: home factors. I don’t think it’s got a great deal to do with the curriculum or the pedagogy (senior high school maths teacher, FG 2, 76).

The English teachers agreed that whole class instruction has become very difficult at the secondary level because there is an expectation that teachers teach students at a level at which they can succeed.

You’ve got classes where the students do range from levels 2 to 5. You have to plan engaging stuff, particularly at the lower level, stuff that’s achievable. It’s a lot of work to do to plan for such a range of students. And in a classroom, you’ve got so many different things going on, different texts, different students, catering for their different needs. It does inevitably create more behavioural problems because you can’t be teaching one text for the whole class. You can occasionally but some of them aren’t going to get it and you want to push those students who can do well (senior high school English teacher, FG 2, 48).

Teachers reported it to be very difficult to hold a class discussion. ‘The levels are just too scattered,’ said a high school English teacher. Another English teacher at the same school mused that this was associated with a decline in students’ listening skills.

I’m finding it harder in terms of the listening skills. I think there has been a shocking deterioration in listening skills. If a student is giving a speech and other people are talking then I find that insulting. I find that quite demeaning for them. I think it is dreadful for their self-esteem (senior high school English teacher, FG 2, 49).

Concerns about the impact of the formal curriculum on behaviour were only reported by secondary teachers.

Students with learning needs

Among the focus group participants were teachers in mainstream primary and secondary classes, primary education support classes and one teacher who provided support in mainstream secondary classes. The view that higher proportions of students with lower abilities and more severe problems are taught in mainstream settings than in the past was widely held.

Teachers expressed concern about the pressure associated with teaching very low-achieving or high-resource need students.

When people say: How do kids get through school and not learn to read and write? I can tell you how they do it: the teacher’s time is spent on special needs children. [Disarming riots.] And children with emotional problems. [Yeah.] They turn up to school everyday and – so called – learn. And there are just more and more problems in society. I don’t know whether it’s magnified in this area or not (primary school teacher, FG 1, 135).

The education support teachers explained the problems they have managing classroom behaviour. While individuals differ ‘as a general rule you will find that the children in education support will act out bad behaviour in a less controlled fashion’. One of the teachers gave an example from her class.

I’ve got a boy just like that. When he goes to his mainstream class, he doesn’t know when to stop. He’ll copy some of the other boys’ behaviour but they know when to stop and he doesn’t (education support teacher, FG 5, 28).
The demands of teaching children on the autism spectrum were raised by mainstream and education support teachers. Both teachers described them as disruptive.

A number of teachers raised concerns about 'the poor middle kids' who they believe are being ignored at the expense of very low-performing students.

The bottom-end kids don't move. [The gap gets bigger and bigger.] They stay there and stay there and the others keep going. [That's right.] The gap gets bigger the higher up the school you go (primary school teacher, FG 1, 55).

Teachers were concerned about higher levels of resources that are focused on these students, some of whom make relatively small gains over time, leaving those students who are more likely to show improvement, as a result of additional investments, without sufficient support.

**Conclusion**

In summarising the focus group discussions, those matters where agreement among numbers of teachers was clearly evident have been given weight.

There was agreement among the focus group participants that much of the unproductive behaviour that teachers deal with in classrooms can be explained by out-of-school factors. Teachers gave examples of students from families which failed to support their children's education, and the difficulties this created for all concerned. They also pointed to the adverse affect the broader social context has had on childhood, the family and schools as institutions.

One of the social changes having had a large impact on teaching is the tendency for many students to resist confidently engagement with schoolwork they consider to be too challenging or of no personal interest. The days have long since passed when teachers can rely on the intrinsic motivation of students to complete assigned tasks, or exercise their authority to compel students to persist and make an effort. It is now common for teachers to use reward systems, offer choices or negotiate terms under which students will complete their particular responses. Even when these systems are in place, teachers gave examples of students who flatly refused to make any effort.

These students pose a dilemma for teachers. Some teachers find it hard to justify directing their effort when they are persistently rebuffed, or when there is no reciprocal display of interest, especially when other more receptive students need and want their help.

With regard to disengagement, there was no consensus on how best to respond to it. Teachers were divided as to whether they can make a difference by modifying their pedagogy, changing the curriculum, streaming students according to their ability, or raising expectations that students must take responsibility for their own learning.

There was agreement that behaviour is more of a problem in English than mathematics, particularly for boys. This view is consistent with the different rates of unproductive behaviour reported by English and mathematics teachers over the four years of the study.

The focus group discussions were held to acquire the perspective of teachers on the analyses of student behaviour and performance presented in earlier chapters. The small group of teachers who took part is not necessarily representative of all the Pipeline teachers and their views; therefore, the outcomes described above should not be interpreted as indicative of what most teachers think about these behavioural issues. It is clear, however, that teachers hold strong views based on their first-hand experience and any effort to improve student behaviour and academic performance must take account of the way in which teachers respond to students on a day-to-day basis.
11. Summary and Conclusions

Introduction
This chapter summarises the main findings of the Pipeline Project. The chapter draws on the literature review, the development of the measures of unproductive behaviour, the quantitative analyses of student behaviour and performance in literacy and numeracy, the focus group discussions with participating teachers, and case studies of individual students.

The generalisations from the study must be tempered by the fact that the Pipeline samples of schools and students were not drawn randomly from the state populations. The schools in the sample on average have lower Socio-economic Indices than the state average; and they are all located in the metropolitan area of Perth. The students in the sample perform slightly below the state averages on the WALNA tests. These features suggest that there is probably a slightly higher level of unproductive behaviour in Pipeline schools than in the state population of school students.

The implications of these findings for policy and practice are presented in the final chapter, Chapter 12.

Unproductive behaviour

The construct of unproductive behaviour
An extensive research literature about child and adolescent behaviour exists. While it is recognised in this literature that certain kinds of abnormal and dysfunctional behaviour will restrict the capacity of students to perform adequately in classroom environments, the frameworks and typologies most commonly used treat schools and classrooms as sites of secondary importance. The instruments were not designed for the purpose of illuminating teaching and learning processes in classrooms.

The Pipeline Project focused on behaviour in classrooms. It proposed a set of student behaviours that were thought likely to impede academic progress. Behaviours that retard student learning were described as unproductive. It was thought that unproductive behaviours were more likely to shed light on the conditions affecting academic progress than behaviours indicating behavioural disorders, though it was recognised that some of the indicators of unproductive behaviour might also indicate the possibility of a mental health problem.

Student behaviour has always been an important issue for teachers. All teachers know that they can only teach effectively if students behave appropriately. Serious incidents threatening the wellbeing of students or staff members must have the highest priority in a system of behaviour management. The question of their impact on the child’s academic progress is of lesser importance at that time. Even when no serious threat to wellbeing is apparent, teachers know that keeping behaviour under control is of critical importance, and that a few, poorly managed disruptive incidents can produce ripple effects through the whole class, thereby destroying the educational value of the lesson. As a result, there is a widely held view among teachers that constructive teaching and learning can only occur after a positive climate has been achieved.

For these reasons, a large proportion of the resources for behaviour management are directed towards those students who threaten others, or who put the most pressure on teachers. Whole management systems have been set up to deal with extreme incidents, possibly warranting student suspension, and thus involving parents or carers. Less serious incidents and low-level, non-intrusive behaviours are usually left to the school to sort out. Yet, as this study has shown, low-level behaviours, especially those indicative of academic disengagement, may have as great
an impact on a student’s academic performance as the behaviours of students who act out and are openly hostile towards the school’s norms of acceptable conduct.

Patterns
The variation in frequencies of unproductive behaviour among schools is linked to the SES of the communities from which the schools draw their students; however, even among schools with similar SES indices, differences occur. The differences may be due to the approaches taken by the schools to manage behaviour and performance, but they may also be due to a more complex set of factors; for example, schools sometimes have unusually high intakes of ‘difficult’ students in a particular year, and teachers are aware that, when it is their turn to teach this group of students, they will be required give extra attention and effort.

In any one year about 60 per cent of students are considered by their teachers to behave productively because, as far as academic progress is concerned, the classroom behaviour of these students is not an issue. The situation varies within individual schools where some classes are more difficult to manage than others; and among schools, particularly schools drawing their intake from suburbs of low socio-economic status. In some schools teachers report that nearly 80 per cent of their students behave productively, whereas in others, as few as 20 per cent are reported to behave positively on this dimension.

Of the ten categories of unproductive behaviour incorporated in the Student Behaviour Checklist, inattentiveness is the most frequently reported category, with more than 20 per cent of students reported to be ‘distractible’, and to lack concentration during lessons. In the primary years around 10-12 per cent of students are reported to be unmotivated, but the percentage rises steeply in Year 10, reaching about 30 per cent in English classes and 22 per cent in mathematics classes.

Aggressive behaviour is confined to a relatively small proportion of all students, around 5 per cent in the primary years, and then decreasing to 3 per cent in English and mathematics classes during Years 8 to 11. The highest incidence of non-compliance in primary schools is found in Year 6 classrooms, with nearly 11 per cent of students reported. In all ten categories of unproductive behaviour, the lowest levels are found in Year 8, the first year of high school.

Less than 1 per cent of students were reported to be unproductive in all ten categories, and about 6 per cent were reported to be unproductive in 5 or more categories. Students having multiple categories of unproductive behaviour were more likely to constitute the subgroup of students who, later in the year, were judged by their teachers to be behaving in ways having a serious impact on their academic progress.

The pattern of unproductive behaviours is generally consistent across the primary school years from Year 2 to Year 7. There is no marked difference between junior, middle and upper primary students; however, the situation in secondary schools is more complex. In the secondary years there are marked differences between mathematics and English classes across all year levels. Initially, in Year 8 and Year 9, teachers report less unproductive behaviour than in Year 7. However, the incidence rises sharply in Year 10 before declining somewhat in Year 11. In Year 10 the level of unproductive behaviour is considerably higher than any other year level in either primary or secondary schooling, particularly in regard to behaviour usually associated with academic disengagement: inattentiveness, lack of motivation, unresponsiveness and lack of preparation.

The level of unproductive behaviour in Education Support Centres is more than twice the level for primary or high schools. This is not surprising as the students attending these centres do so because of their severe emotional and medical problems. Students with disabilities who are integrated into regular classrooms also show much higher than average levels of unproductive behaviour in most, though not in all cases.

Analyses of the responses to the ten categories of unproductive behaviour in the Student Behaviour Questionnaire produced four distinctive groups. The first and largest comprised students who were behaving productively. Cluster analyses of the students who were reported to behave unproductively on one or more categories of the Student Behaviour Questionnaire produced three additional groups. Members of the first group (1) were disengaged but were not aggressive or non-compliant. By way of contrast, members of the second group (2) were principally defined by their aggressive and non-compliant behaviour, though they commonly were reported by their teachers to be unproductive on five or more categories. This was the smallest group.

Finally, there was a group (3) whose members were reported to show a mix of behaviours of which the most common was disruptive behaviour exemplified by calling out, seeking attention and provoking others.
These four behaviour groups were named the 'Productive', the 'Disengaged', the 'Uncooperative' and the 'Low-level Disruptive'. The size of each group varied slightly according to the cohort and year of the analysis.

In broad terms, the Productive Group held 60 per cent of students, 20 per cent were in the Disengaged Group, 12 per cent were in the Low-level Disruptive Group and the remaining 8 per cent comprised the Uncooperative Group.

**Incidence**

There are no benchmarks against which the incidence of unproductive behaviour reported in this study can be compared. As indicated in Chapter 3, it is conceivable that a student with a behavioural disorder could be reported as behaving productively during lessons and, conversely, a student who is highly unproductive in class have no recognisable mental health problem. Numbers of cases fitted these categories.

The most commonly used index of student behaviour problems is the rate of school suspensions. However, these statistics include cases where students behave productively in the classroom but have committed a serious misdemeanour elsewhere at the school or on the way to school. Students are not suspended for failing to concentrate or make an effort to produce work of satisfactory quality.

Students therefore may be sanctioned in the most severe way open to the school for committing a serious breach of the school code of conduct. Yet, if the breach were an exceptional event, the behaviour that led to the suspension, and the suspension itself, might have only a temporary and moderate impact on a particular student's academic progress. Persistent, low level disruption or inattentiveness may have a much more damaging impact on academic progress, yet the behaviour does not usually generate a formal sanction from the teacher or the school. Hence, suspension rates are not sound indicators of the level of unproductive classroom behaviour.

The incidence of student mental health problems is sometimes used as an alternative to suspension rates as an approximate estimate of the numbers of students who need special assistance. There are widely varying figures for the particular problem behaviours, or clusters of such behaviours, depending on the behaviour measured and the population from which the information has been collected. Though for some disorders the estimated incidence is one per cent or less, for other kinds of disorders the incidence is reported in the literature to be as high as 15 per cent. Surveys of school students have indicated that the figure may be higher than 20 per cent when aggregated across a range of mental health problems (Zubrick et al., 1997).

The Pipeline Project found that, with regard to unproductive behaviour, a large proportion of students exhibit one or more unproductive behaviours during the year: 40 percent is the approximate figure. But for half of these students, their behaviour does not impact critically on their academic performance. Furthermore, their behaviour is three times more likely to improve than worsen during the year, and the improvement may extend into the following year. Only a small subset of each cohort, about 3 per cent, behave in ways from year to year that have a serious impact on their learning.

Teachers in regular classrooms reported that 3.6 per cent of all students had a formal diagnosis of a socio-emotional problem as far as they were aware. Half of these students behaved in ways that had a serious impact on their learning in class.

How can these results from the Pipeline Project be reconciled with the literature on the incidence of mental health problems in children and adolescents? It would seem that as far as academic progress is concerned, in many cases, the students' mental health is not a big handicap either because its onset is episodic, teachers manage the students' behaviour adroitly, or because some other ameliorating factor is apposite. It is also possible that some of the discrepancy can be explained by errors of classification, that is, fewer students have mental health problems than reported in surveys, and/or more students consistently behave in a seriously unproductive way than was reported in the Pipeline study. Other possible explanations could usefully be explored more comprehensively in a subsequent study.

One important implication arising from this analysis is that if in any year 20 per cent of students behave in ways having a serious impact on their learning, and if fewer than 4 per cent have a diagnosed mental health problem, then other factors are contributing to the behaviour of the remaining 16 per cent. The case studies would suggest that events occurring in the home are prime factors.
While it may seem to be stating the obvious, the general conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that student behaviour can be measured in different ways for different purposes. The incidence of mental health problems in schools is of importance when considering the student support services that should be made available to schools. The incidence of unproductive behaviour is of importance when considering the educational support that should be made available to schools. The two sets of figures and the two purposes should not be conflated as though the provision of one kind of support will solve problems requiring another.

**Behaviour trajectories**

Considerable research has been undertaken into the trajectories of students who were identified at an early age to be anti-social. In some cases, the studies have tracked subjects from infancy to adulthood using various psychological instruments to measure the extent of their anti-social behaviour. In general, these studies show that about half the children who start school exhibiting episodes of antisocial behaviour can be expected to improve over time. While it is difficult to generalise across the commonly reported externalising disorders among children of school age, the tendency for half of the students diagnosed with behavioural disorders to improve over time seems to hold true. Many children with severe behaviour problems at some point or other improve either as a result of maturation, effective parenting, or some kind of intervention.

The Pipeline Project sought to map the behaviour of students over a four-year period. The analyses of the responses to the Student Behaviour Questionnaire showed that the behaviour of about 40 per cent of students is set on a steady productive trajectory extending over four consecutive years. Of the remaining 60 per cent, nearly a third of this group (19.5 per cent of all students) were reported to be unproductive during each of the four years. Put simply, about 40 per cent of students are consistently productive and about 20 per cent are consistently unproductive. The behaviour of the remainder fluctuates from year to year.

When the severity of the impact of the students' behaviour was taken into account, the percentage of students who were consistently and seriously unproductive shrank to 3 per cent. That is, only a small percentage of students appear to be locked into a pattern of behaviour that seriously impedes their academic progress. This 3 per cent, as mentioned earlier, includes students who have mental health problems and are educated in regular classrooms. However, as the case studies have shown, some students have exceptionally good and bad years.

Although the group of students whose behaviour is seriously unproductive over four consecutive years is small, the educational significance of a student experiencing even one bad year should not be discounted. If a student has failed to grasp an essential understanding or mastered a key set of skills during a particular year, then the educational scaffold required for later learning will be flawed. Unless students are able by some means or other to make up this deficit then they may struggle even though they attempt to engage with the teaching matter. With this caveat in mind, it should be noted that about 20 per cent of students behave in a seriously unproductive manner in any one year, with about 10 per cent being unproductive over two consecutive years.

There is no simple stereotype or identifying characteristic of the students whose behaviour is having a persistent, negative impact on their learning. Students can seriously retard their academic progress by exhibiting any subset of unproductive behaviours measured by the Student Behaviour Questionnaire, though the wider the range the more likely they are to be members of this core with a serious problem of unproductive behaviour. None of the students appear to particularly like school or engage energetically with their schoolwork.

**Academic performance**

**Measures of academic performance**

The study employed two kinds of indicators of academic performance: teacher global judgments and student results on state and national tests. It was found that teachers' judgments yielded a more conservative picture of the performance of students than that produced by the WALNA and NAPLAN results. Teachers reported that more than twice the number of students was performing below the benchmark standards than were identified by the tests. The use of the WALNA and NAPLAN results to produce academic trajectories also raised questions about the use of the tests for this purpose. The tests were designed to estimate population parameters and may not have the precision required to map the progress of individual students. Though they have been used in this way in the
Pipeline study, it was clear that tests of only 25 or so items in length were being stretched to their limit when used to describe changes in performance over time. This matter will be discussed further in Chapter 12.

Impact of behaviour on academic performance

The study has found that students who are aggressive and do not comply with the classroom behaviour norms generally perform at the lowest levels. Typically, these students are unproductive over five or more categories, and are usually disengaged from schoolwork. However, their performance is only marginally better than students who do not challenge the class rules but are also disengaged from their schoolwork. Disengagement appears to be the prime correlate of student underperformance; it is also the case that some students behave unproductively yet do relatively well on measures of academic performance. However, as a general rule, students who behave unproductively are more likely to perform poorly in reading and numeracy, thereby failing to meet proficiency standards. On average they perform at a standard between one and two year levels below their counterparts who behave productively.

The students who are generally compliant and cooperative, though disengaged, constituted approximately one fifth of the student cohort; this is a large group. Most of these students would not have mental health problems requiring access to psychological and medical services. They are students who, for example, do not find their schoolwork interesting, are inclined to give up on challenging tasks, look for distractions, fail to prepare for lessons, and opt out of class activities.

Academic trajectories

These conclusions regarding behaviour and performance are, of course, based on average results. Within each group and in any year there are significant exceptions to the general rule. These exceptions are very important though they are often obscured in quantitative studies.

Academic progress, like unproductive behaviour, produces irregular academic trajectories for large numbers of students with their individual results showing dips and peaks. This was illustrated by mapping the results on WALNA and NAPLAN for 2004, 2006 and 2008 of those students who performed at the 2nd and 9th decile in 2004. The results showed that of the students who slipped down the performance scale in 2006 and 2008; whereas of the students who were performing relatively poorly in 2004, improved their standing by more than half relative to other students, some by a margin of more that 50 percentile points.

These results call into question the standard interpretation of the Matthew effect which implies there to be very little slippage or overtaking during schooling, that is, that a student’s academic trajectory is set early in the formal educational journey and is generally unwavering. The Pipeline data show that the behaviour and academic performance of about half the students do not follow a smooth, steady trajectory; over a four-year period there are ups and downs, good years and not so good years. The trend lines based on cohort mean scores belie the fact that the individual pathways of many students zigzag during the year and from year to year.

However, it is also important to get off to a good start. Students who consistently behave in a productive manner perform on average at a significantly higher level in reading and numeracy, tending to maintain their advantage over the four-year period. On the other hand, the students in the unproductive behaviour group generally do not catch up, although, based on the behaviour of students in 2005, the differences between the three groups – the disengaged, the low-level disruptive and the uncooperative of behaviour – tend to even out.

The interviews with teachers and the investigations of individual cases show that circumstances change from year to year for students and teachers. The behaviour and academic performances of students can deteriorate sharply because of a traumatic event and improve significantly because the problem has been resolved, or the determined effort of particular students. They also show that in some cases, exceptional improvement in behaviour and academic performance is due to the commitment of teachers who have been able to establish special bonds with the student.

This conclusion, based on a small number of case studies, is supported by the finding that emerged from the quantitative analysis, namely, that the behaviour of unproductively behaved students is three times more likely to improve than worsen over the course of the year. Teachers make a significant difference to the prospects of the majority of students.
While there are individual ‘success stories’, there are also cases where students, particularly in high school, appear to have given up and teachers feel powerless to ignite any enthusiasm for learning. As students mature during the secondary years, teachers are more likely to expect students to act responsibly and engage with the material being taught. Where students flatly refuse, and various stratagems adopted by the teachers fail to be effective, teachers under these circumstances tend to place the interests of compliant, hard-working students ahead of those who tune out and become disruptive.

**Key issues**

**Causal relationships**

The Pipeline study was not designed in such a way that the direction of the causal relationship between classroom behaviour and academic performance could be rigorously tested; thus the observations that follow are, to some extent, speculative.

It would seem that significant numbers of children have acquired unproductive behaviour patterns prior to reaching Year 2. Anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that many of these children begin school unable to socialise with peers, follow directions, concentrate, sit still, or behave in ways that are required for formal instruction in classrooms. It is improbable that students began to behave in these ways in the early years because of frustration from constant school failure, since these patterns were established before their first attendance at school.

However, it is possible, indeed likely, that for some of these children the tendencies were exacerbated by their early experience of schooling. Failure to keep up with peers, irritability caused by tiredness, the obligation to sit quietly and still for extended periods of time, and a general lack of social skills could all combine, leading to patterns of unproductive classroom behaviour and poor academic performance. In this example, not only are there multiple causes but the negative relationship between behaviour and learning is reflexive, hardening as the negative feedback acquired by the student reinforces the earlier experiences.

The issue of causality is important because if the direction of the relationship were simple and linear, whereby academic performance largely determines behaviour, then interventions might concentrate on providing every student with some degree of academic success by moderating the curriculum, grouping students according to their ability and employing other kinds of step-by-step instructional techniques. If on the other hand, classroom behaviour determines academic success, then interventions might focus on moderating the unproductive behaviour through professional development of teachers, counselling of students and so on.

The question of how schools should approach this issue will be taken up in Chapter 12.

**Gender differences**

Sharp differences between the behaviour of boys and girls were apparent. Boys are more likely than girls to exhibit unproductive behaviours in every year level from 2 to 7; this was also the case for high school students of Year 8 and upwards in both English and mathematics classes.

Teachers nominated inattentiveness, lack of motivation, and disruptive behaviour as the behaviours that most typified the unproductive behaviour of both the boys and girls whose unproductive behaviour persisted throughout the year. Irregular attendance is one behaviour differentiating the genders; it is one of the dominant behaviours most frequently nominated for girls during the primary and secondary years.

Boys are much more likely than girls to be classified as members of the Uncooperative behaviour group - the lowest performing group on the WALNA and NAPLAN assessments. Boys are three times more likely to be suspended than girls, the suspended students being particularly differentiated from other students by their aggressive and confrontational behaviours.

The consistently higher levels of unproductive behaviour of boys do not appear to make much difference to their academic results in literacy and numeracy. While girls perform better than boys on average in reading, the mean differences are relatively small. In numeracy, however, boys do slightly better than girls, though the differences are not statistically significant.

There are considerably more boys than girls in the lowest two deciles of the WALNA reading test, though the gender difference for WALNA mathematics is slightly in favour of boys.
Student mobility
The capacity of a school to produce a productive educational climate, encouraging high levels of academic performance, is very strongly tied to enrolment demographics. The simplest way to improve the academic standing of a school would be to exclude students who are disruptive and disengaged and enrol new students with ability and a work ethic. This kind of strategy is possible under policies that extend parental choice of schooling and encourage parents to shop around. Hence, schools that fail to retain well behaved, academically oriented students run the risk of sliding into a spiral of decline. The Matthew effect is played out on a school-level basis: advantaged schools become more advantaged and those that are struggling, fall lower in repute thus finding it even harder to retain their able students.

This dynamic was evident when the impact of the transition of the Pipeline Year 7 students to high school was analysed. Many students did not attend their local high school in Year 8. Of those who did, they were less productively behaved and performed at lower levels in reading and mathematics on average than the students who made the transition to non-Pipeline schools.

It was not possible to establish the destination of these students and there are many reasons why the students might have attended other government or non-government schools. However, the diaspora at the end of Year 7 has an important consequence - Pipeline high school teachers will find it harder to establish productive behavioural norms and produce satisfactory academic results that would be possible if their schools had been able to capture all of the Year 7 intake. As a result, the high schools have to deal with a higher concentration of students who behave unproductively than would otherwise be the case.

However, the transition from primary school to high school is not the only point at which students change schools. One of the practical problems faced by the Pipeline Project was the attrition caused by students changing schools. Over a four-year period 44 per cent of the 2005 cohort had enrolled in non-Pipeline schools, obviously a significant turnover in school enrolments. While some of the students who move do so at the instigation of parents who prefer another school, others are the result of families shifting their residence or the break-up of families where children are cared for by a separated parent or by a member of the extended family. Thus, the group of students who are mobile may be composed of students who are highly productive in class as well as those who are seriously at risk.

Conclusion
This chapter has reported the most salient and significant findings from the Pipeline Project. These may be summarised as follows:

The constructs of productive and unproductive behaviour usefully differentiate the classroom behaviour of students.

Students who behave productively have a much greater likelihood of reaching proficiency standards in literacy and numeracy.

The most prevalent form of unproductive behaviour is student disengagement.

Year 2 students exhibit levels of unproductive behaviour comparable with other primary year levels.

Year 8 teachers report the lowest levels of unproductive behaviour of any year level from Year 2 to Year 11; the highest levels are reported in Year 10, though the reported levels in Education Support Centres are considerably higher again.

Student productive behaviour is strongly related to academic performance; it seems most likely each contributes to the other.

The behaviour of students is three times more likely to improve during the course of the school year than worsen.

Not all of the issues addressed by the Pipeline study were resolved and some of the findings challenged conventional wisdom concerning classroom behaviour and performance.

The frequency of unproductive classroom behaviour is about the same at all primary year levels. This may be a surprise to people, unfamiliar with contemporary school life, who imagine that in the early years students are docile, compliant and generally well behaved. Teachers in the early years of primary schools must work just as hard in shaping the behaviour of their students as teachers in the senior primary years.
In high school, Year 8 students are reported to exhibit the lowest levels of unproductive behaviour of any year level and the Year 10 students the highest. Conventional wisdom has it that student behaviour is more of a problem in high school than primary school; moreover it is often thought that student discipline problems peak at Year 9 so that at this year level the highest levels of unproductive behaviour should be found.

The frequency of unproductive behaviour varies considerably from school to school. While the socio-economic status of the school is generally related to the frequency, there are exceptions to this general rule.

The gender differences in classroom behaviour are consistent and of a relatively large magnitude; boys clearly show more unproductive behaviour than girls. However, the differences in academic performance are relatively small and, notwithstanding their behaviour, boys show an edge in numeracy.

A high level of volatility in student behaviour and performance from year to year is apparent. While some of the variation may be due to errors of classification and measurement, errors of this kind do not explain the full extent of the variation.

The size of the group of students, whom teachers consider each year over a four-year period to behave in a way that is seriously unproductive, is relatively small (3 per cent). This finding challenges the conventional wisdom that students who are responding poorly in class most likely have a long record of behaviour problems.

The findings outlined in this chapter bear on the metaphor of the ‘pipeline’. The Pipeline study set out to test the assertion that with regard to academic success, the die is cast in the early years; students who behave unproductively or perform poorly on academic tests rarely recover; they slide inexorably into the ‘tail’ of low-performing, troublesome students. This is clearly an oversimplification; students are constantly making up or losing ground. Even students who are amongst the lowest performing and least productively behaved groups can make remarkable recoveries.
Introduction

This final chapter examines the implications of the results summarised in Chapter 11. The suggested changes to policy and practice are confined to those arising from the findings relating to the focal point of the study, namely, trajectories of academic performance and classroom behaviour.

It should be noted that the Pipeline study did not set out to review the services made available to schools, or to evaluate the methods used by them to address behaviour problems and improve academic performance; but had a specific research focus. Hence, it would be inappropriate in this final chapter to make gratuitous recommendations about what needs to be done. However, the findings from the study do suggest a number of areas where attention should be focused.

The first addresses the topic of student academic engagement. While the evidence collected did not indicate that student disengagement was more of a problem in Western Australian schools than in other jurisdictions, or that a particular factor was exacerbating the problem in Pipeline schools. Nevertheless it is clear that substantial numbers of students from their early years do not engage with what is being taught, thereby reducing their prospects of academic progress. To use a colloquial turn of phrase, with regard to student behaviour and performance, disengagement is ‘the elephant in the classroom’.

The next consideration is what more could be done to assist schools to improve their use of information in guiding school policies and practices relating to behaviour and academic performance. These suggestions are based partly on what the Department of Education and Training (DET) and individual schools are already doing, as well as what has emerged from the analyses of Pipeline data.

The third area contains further suggestions aimed at strengthening the capacity of schools to address problems of behaviour and performance. This focuses particularly on the problem of establishing an effective partnership between the school and home for students who are failing to meet academic proficiency and behavioural standards, and where a downward trajectory is evident.

There is no single, obvious way of improving behaviour and performance. The core of what is being proposed can be best summed up as ‘systemic reform’. Various aspects of the school system should be subjected to review in the light of the evidence provided in the Pipeline Project. In some cases existing arrangements should be modified, current initiatives should be extended or given a higher priority and, in some instances, new initiatives should be launched. The outcomes of these reviews should be synthesised to form the basis of a concerted drive to lift the level of academic engagement of West Australian students.

Academic engagement

Establishing engagement as a systemic priority

System structures

In order to assist schools to manage the behaviour of students, DET provides a range of services. For example, approximately one third of schools receive additional funding, many classroom teachers have participated in professional development programs, and the Department provides schools with access to various kinds of consultancy services. Much of this additional support is focused on supporting schools to manage the group of students who are highly disruptive and whose behaviour threatens their wellbeing as well as that of peers and teachers.
The Behaviour Management and Discipline strategy has allocated over $60 million over the past seven years to assist schools in managing the behaviour of these students; and the Government has recently announced its intention to appoint additional school psychologists and school chaplains. Much less support is directed towards students who are disengaged from their schoolwork, but are not disciplinary problems. Schools are expected to deal with this problem from within their existing resources.

Within the Department, student behaviour services are managed and provided separately from those providing curriculum and pedagogical support designed to improve educational standards of performance. This has been a longstanding practice, even though it is recognised that standards of both behaviour and academic performance are interdependent.

Student engagement with learning forms the nexus between student behaviour and academic achievement. It is unclear where, in the departmental structure, responsibility for improving student academic engagement resides. The creation of a new division of student engagement that spans curriculum and psychological services is not suggested. However, some kind of bridging is required to ensure: appropriate policies are formulated; centrally developed programs take account of the relationship between student behaviour and performance; and schools struggling to establish a culture of academic engagement have access to the various forms of support needed.

Making productive student behaviour an explicit goal in programs and policy statements

In the current educational climate, the improvement of student performance on standardised academic tests is assuming an unprecedented importance. New agreements between Commonwealth and state governments tie the actual level of Commonwealth funding to the achievement of student performance targets in literacy and numeracy. School systems will be given reward payments if they are able to demonstrate they have achieved ‘ambitious’ goals. As these agreements take full effect, there will be increasing pressures on schools to demonstrate they have been able to use existing resources to raise specific proficiency standards of students.

Particular scrutiny is being focused on the percentages of students who perform at or below minimum proficiency standards for literacy and numeracy. Over past decades there has been a substantial investment of funding, specifically intended to lift the performance of these students, but little overall progress has been made: the percentage of students in Australian schools who do not reach the minimum standard has remained nearly constant.

In the various documents describing the interventions designed to improve literacy and numeracy for these students, there is seldom any reference to student behaviour. The Pipeline Project has shown there to be multiple causes of low academic performance and demonstrated that classroom behaviour is clearly one prominent among them. Students whose behaviour is reported to be severely unproductive generally perform at statistically significant lower levels in literacy and numeracy than those who behave productively. Many of the students who are underperforming have a history of disengagement.

Raising academic standards tends to be construed mainly as a curriculum and assessment problem so that any extended discussion of student behaviour would be seen as out of place. It is suggested that this should change.

As a general principle, initiatives designed to improve literacy and numeracy should incorporate strategies to improve student academic engagement.

One of the few references to student behaviour in the recent National Education Agreements of the Council of Australian Governments is contained in one of the five listed priority areas. The document states that ‘All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling’ (italics added). This is the only explicit reference to student behaviour in the documents specifying the basis of the agreements. This is an appropriate goal but nothing further is stated about how the goal should be achieved. The inference is that either improving student behaviour is not perceived to be an essential strategy for improving student academic performance, or the authors of the agreements were unable to articulate how it should be done.

The Department of Education and Training should use the National Partnerships with the Commonwealth Government to focus systemic effort on improving engagement, in order to meet nationally agreed targets for Literacy and Numeracy.

One of the difficulties in framing an educational strategy to lift the levels of student engagement is that
such improvements need the negotiating of so many boundaries. A major US review of the problem of academic engagement (National Research Council, 2004) summarised the problem this way:

No single educational policy or practice, no matter how well grounded in research, can be expected to increase students' academic engagement if the policies and practices in which they are embedded are ignored. For example, small, personalised schools may not enhance meaningful cognitive engagement and learning if they do not also provide effective teaching and a strong press for achieving high academic standards; the most engaging teaching practices may have little effect on a student who is homeless, has serious, untreated health problems, or faces the chronic threat of violence (p. 10).

In other words, the policies and practices must be aligned. Changes in one policy area can have negative repercussions in another. If this is so, then where should DET begin when addressing this problem?

A starting point might be to examine current and prospective school improvement initiatives ensuring that each contributes specifically to the engagement of students in regular classrooms. For example, all Australian governments are collaborating in the production of a national curriculum. This development provides a rare opportunity to design a curriculum that has the prospect of maximising the engagement of students with differing interests, abilities and backgrounds. It is a difficult task since the designers will want to produce curriculum that also encourages high standards, suitable for talented and well-motivated students. However, the curriculum must also encourage the engagement of students who struggle to keep up with peers and who find academic learning pointless. In other words, teachers must be given scope to make significant adaptations to the curriculum. It is in the students' interest that they actually engage deeply with a limited body of essential learning. It is much harder to engage students who are generally unmotivated when they must cover an extensive and excessively prescribed body of content.

The National Curriculum is only one example. If each new initiative was systematically put to the test, it may be possible to make serious inroads into the level of disengagement in schools.

Strengthening engagement in schools

Building a school ethos of engagement

It is clear that unproductive classroom behaviour is caused by multiple factors that combine to form a complicated, interactive web. It is also clear that the trigger for unproductive behaviour varies from student to student. Hence it would be improbable that any single intervention, unless broadly conceived, would remedy the situation.

The Pipeline study has focused on student behaviour in individual classrooms. Yet the school, rather than the classroom teacher or the individual student, is the key organisational unit in which improvement strategies must be built and rebuilt. Schools are aggregations of classrooms and students; thus improvement likely lies in the adoption of better school-wide processes than in the adoption of a new ‘product’ that hitherto has been missing. Many of the strategies that can be used to strengthen academic engagement are outside the control of individual teachers and require the support of the whole school. Hence, schools will need, from time to time, central and regional support.

The Pipeline Project has not attempted to produce a recipe for what needs to be done to build an ethos of academic engagement. Some of the obvious factors read like clichés from the effective schools literature. This is not surprising as a school can only be effective when its students are motivated to learn. The factors include: a strong and energetic leadership team; clearly enunciated expectations regarding respectful behaviour and academic standards; parental backup; flexibility to modify the curriculum and reorganise classes; staff who can work with students out of the regular classroom context in school time and out of hours; respect for, and acknowledgement of, the efforts of staff members who make small gains under daunting circumstances; and an evidence base that maps progress, confirming success and drawing attention to failures.

The problem with such lists is that they are easier to compile than to put into practice. Because the Pipeline study did not explicitly examine the question of how
to improve engagement it would be inappropriate to recommend a specific course of action. A more realistic starting point would be to canvass school principals to find examples of schools that have constructed a climate of engagement against considerable odds.

While schools serving low-SES communities may potentially face higher levels of disengagement than other schools, the relationship is not fixed. Schools with similar demographics have met with varying degrees of success in extending students’ enthusiasm for learning because of the ways in which they have approached the problem.

Changing behavioural norms is likely to be a hard, protracted process. In so far as ‘easy riding’ can be recognised as symptomatic of ‘negotiated disengagement’, changing these practices will require a concerted effort from school staffs.

Schools enrolling low-SES students, and that have made significant progress in promoting a culture of engagement with learning, should be invited to take on a leadership role for the school system and their continuing work should be facilitated by delegations of authority that allow them to expand what they are doing.

It should also be noted that the most challenging schools are those where the level of engagement has ebbed to very low levels. Different approaches may be needed to actually ‘resuscitate’ a school, as opposed to only maintaining the level or moderately increasing it. It may be unreasonable to expect school staff to address these problems successfully within the existing regulatory frameworks.

This is not a novel suggestion. Over recent decades, education departments have introduced structural changes. Middle schooling is one such change: purpose-built middle schools catering specifically for Years 6 to 9 have been constructed in some communities. This initiative should now also be reviewed in the light of Pipeline study findings and the results of evaluations made available for analysis. While concern has been expressed about the academic standards achieved in middle schools, these schools are typically organised in ways that are expressly designed to foster student engagement.

DET should consider ‘waiving’ existing policies and rules in such cases, allowing the school staff members as much scope as possible to modify the learning environment.

The Government’s decision to support an extension of autonomy to selected schools may provide an opportunity to trial alternative forms of school organization.

It is timely for DET to undertake a review of school organisational structures that are conducive to the achievement of a high level of student engagement.

Starting with the education of boys in the early years

Among the most salient findings of the Pipeline study was the high incidence of disengagement in the early years, particularly the predominance of boys. The results are contrary to the conventional wisdom that disengagement is largely a high school phenomenon. For example, a recent OECD study of science education observes:

Most children come to school ready and willing to learn. International studies of primary school age children generally reveal high levels of interest and positive attitudes to subjects such as science (OECD, 2007a: p. 122).

Similarly, an authoritative US review of student engagement begins with the following observation:

Children often come to school eager to learn but, as this report suggests, many lose their academic motivation as they move through elementary school into high school. In fact, by the time many students enter high school, disengagement from course work and serious study is common (National Research Council, 2004: p. ix)

While the way in which students express their disengagement may change as they grow older, the Pipeline evidence challenges this conclusion. Not only is disengagement a serious issue for students in the early years, but gender appears to be a significant factor. The Pipeline results invite readers to question the suitability of current educational practices for boys.

A recent OECD report posits several possible reasons for the over-representation of boys in the populations of students with behaviour problems (OECD, 2007b). Explanations suggested in the report include the possibility of a greater vulnerability of boys than girls during the developmental years to the effects of illness and trauma; the tendency for males to externalise their feelings in
school more openly than girls; and the feminisation of schooling which has subtly shaped the curriculum so that language skills are emphasised at the expense of others.

DET is currently reviewing the curriculum for the early years and developing assessment tools that will detect a student’s grasp of the foundational skills for literacy. It is important that gender differences in developmental readiness are taken into account. The new framework needs to be sympathetic to the gender differences, or the reforms may unintentionally exacerbate the disengagement of a significant proportion of students. It would be a mistake to dismiss the unproductive behaviour as ‘boys being boys’, and to assume they will eventually ‘come good’ when they mature. Questions also exist about how best to approach the teaching of numeracy to girls.

The gender differences also raise the question about the value of extending the proportion of the school day allocated to teaching literacy for students performing below benchmark standards, particularly if the students’ behaviour is problematical, they are disengaged, and they are boys.

As with many of the problems addressed by the Pipeline study, no simple solution is in sight. The gender differences have been observed over many years and reported in the research literature; in some quarters these differences have come to be regarded virtually as a natural phenomenon - an unduly fatalistic position. Many of the Pipeline teachers work extraordinarily hard to accommodate such differences, reporting examples of success. However, the issue is one of systemic importance, and DET should provide leadership in this area by coordinating the work of schools committed to redressing the gender problem.

DET should provide selected schools with the resources to undertake networked school improvement projects designed to share strategies that engage boys in activities that will simultaneously engage them and promote language competence.

Using information about behaviour and academic progress

Information for case management

Evidence-based decision making

Most contemporary public policy documents urge agencies to use evidence to inform decisions about the delivery of services. Digital technologies have enabled agencies to collect large bodies of data pertaining to demographics, costs and effectiveness of programs. DET has been at the forefront of these developments as they apply to education; but it is unlikely that interest in basing important decisions on relevant evidence will diminish. The Department should aim to become the national leader in the field of education.

It is important that opportunities for evidence-based approaches to decision making are extended to schools. This became apparent during the course of the Pipeline Project. The starting point should be the clarification of what schools need to know. Too often, the starting point is the identification of what central authorities need to know about schools and, after establishing the centre’s information needs, the information systems are subsequently adapted for school use. Evidence-based practice means that practitioners must have access to pertinent information about their students and use it judiciously.

Adopting a long-term perspective

The grouping of students into classes according to year levels has been an enduring, taken-for-granted feature of the organisation of schools. In February each year, students are assigned to a class and meet their teachers under whose care they will spend the school year. The following February the process begins again. The progression through school is divided into discrete, annual stages. Not surprisingly, academic progress is mainly construed as progress during a single school year. It is uncommon for student progress to be tracked and trends reported over the duration of a student’s primary or secondary schooling.

What is being asserted here is that the systems in place generally revolve around annual cycles. This encourages teachers to focus on the wellbeing of their students mainly while they are in their classrooms, making it hard for them to adopt a long-term perspective.
The Pipeline Project has shown over a four-year period that, although many students followed a steady and predictable trajectory of improvement, some trajectories zigzagged, and others showed a general decline. These patterns would not be obvious in a school with the main focus on the ‘here and now’, and where there is no means of acquiring extended trajectories of student behaviour and performance. Yet students with chronic behavioural and learning problems require monitoring over several years.

The Pipeline study has shown that the amount of effort invested in an individual student can be blown away so easily. Where students make exceptional improvement in the one year, the momentum needs to be maintained over subsequent years; where there is a decline, the slump needs to be arrested.

Teachers as case managers

There is currently a high level of ambiguity about the role of teachers in addressing the social and medical problems faced by students. Information is informally shared in staff room discussion about students whose patterns of behaviour are known to them. Sometimes facts that may explain a student’s behaviour are revealed serendipitously in these discussions. Teachers are encouraged to feel responsible for addressing the problems impeding the students’ academic progress; yet they are also encouraged to feel reliant on expert advice from other service professionals. These are not usually readily accessible; thus their support is found hard to acquire.

The Pipeline Project showed that teachers and other school staff members must deal with many complex cases where students are experiencing problems which hamper their academic progress. In most of these cases, teachers have an extensive knowledge of the circumstances contributing to the problem. Together with staff members who have taught such students over several years, or have been acquainted with these students over an extended period of time, they are able to weigh up what is known about the student and assess what is holding the student back. However, there is some uncertainty as to whether teachers should assume this role and ‘case manage’ these students; or whether that job should be assigned to experts.

Some teachers are concerned that the disclosure of information about students, even to fellow staff members, might label them as ‘problem students’ and set in train a self-fulfilling dynamic, thereby prejudicing their prospects. The argument is sometimes made that the segmentation of schooling into year levels is actually a positive feature since it enables students each year to make a fresh start. There are also uncertainties about what type of information held by the principal or other agencies should be shared with teachers, for example, the medical history of a student or parent. There is a certain irony about this situation since, in many instances, teachers know about sensitive family matters because of self-disclosure by parents or their children.

The issue of access by teachers to information about student background and wellbeing is a matter that needs resolution. Obviously, the sharing of this kind of information raises complex ethical issues and appropriate protocols should be put in place. But there are also good reasons for teachers needing access to all the information thought to bear on a student’s behaviour and performance at school.

Therefore, DET should undertake a review of the information available, and of the information needed to enable school personnel to make evidence-based judgments about how to address the problems indicated by student behaviour and performance.

DET should undertake a project which draws on cases such as those described in this report, and model what teachers and school personnel need to know about the students if they are to intervene successfully and accelerate an individual student’s progress. Such a developmental project would appropriately fit under the umbrella of the COAG National Partnership activities.

The capacity of schools to operate in this manner is variable. Some schools, on their own initiatives, have developed sophisticated processes for screening students and for reviewing their performance and behaviour; whereas others have found it difficult to inculcate a culture that values evidence-based decision-making. Therefore, three further initiatives should also be undertaken to assist schools. First, DET should harvest the expertise that currently resides in schools.

Innovative schools that have developed their own information systems and case management processes should be acknowledged and their successful work widely promulgated.
Second, DET should develop a training program, drawing both on the experience of schools that are leading practitioners and experts from other areas. The skills and understandings required to make evidence-based judgments about student behaviour and performance do not appear to have been the focus of recent professional development.

Professional development of teachers should include the opportunity for them to upgrade their skills in interpreting qualitative and quantitative data describing performance and behaviour.

A staff member with the technical capacity should be appointed to every school to acquire information, map progress over the course of a student’s attendance at the school, and develop student trajectories enabling teachers to keep track of progress and to monitor whether their interventions are having a measurable effect.

Each school should have a staff member with the technical expertise to use information systems that map individual student behaviour and academic progress.

Providing better data on student progress

Using NAPLAN to measure progress

Traditionally, standardised tests reported student performance relative to other students who sat the test. Over the past decade or so, such normative reporting of results has been replaced by standards-referenced reporting. These report whether students have met a nationally defined benchmark or standard. Now an interest is emerging in using tests that have been designed to measure whether individual students are making progress. In order to determine the progress of a student, multiple measures of academic performance are needed to ascertain whether the student’s performance has improved over a designated period of time.

National assessment is assuming critical importance in educational policy making. The tests are designed to produce reliable estimates of school and system productivity. The use of the tests to measure progress over time is, in a sense, a by-product. However, the accuracy with which the NAPLAN tests can be used to measure individual student progress from testing occasion to testing occasion is unclear. The statistics describing the technical capacity of the tests to perform these functions are not publicly available. With regard to the WALNA tests, and the NAPLAN tests that have superseded them, users of the results must act on faith that the scores accurately measure the performance of students; and that inferences regarding a student’s growth can be reliably made from the test results.

However, these national tests were not designed for use by teachers to measure the progress of individual students, even though they can be used for that purpose as demonstrated in this study. A more serious limitation is the infrequency of the measures, namely, four occasions during the primary and secondary years. If teachers are to map progress and use the results to make decisions about the progress of individual students, different kinds of tests are required. These could be administered by schools when they judge it to be necessary.

‘On demand’ testing to measure progress

The Pipeline Project results have pointed to the need to consider student progress in terms of trajectories, and to use the trajectory as an indicator of whether to make a specific intervention in the education of a student. The question that arises concerns how this could best be done. How should individual student progress be measured?

An impediment to assessing student progress over more than a single year is the lack of appropriate assessment instruments. However, there is a considerable amount of activity in this area both in Australia and overseas. The British Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has launched a project known as Making Good Progress, designed to assist schools measure individual student progress, and recognising that individuals learn at different rates (DfES, 2006). In addition to establishing how many students attain national benchmarks, the DfES has piloted a system that identifies whether students have made exceptional progress, particularly students who have fallen behind and have been helped to ‘catch up’. Schools have been provided with software to help monitor the progress of students. As well, tests have been developed that are focused on particular levels of attainment. Schools arrange for a student to sit the tests if they think the student has demonstrated progress by reaching appropriate milestones. Two matters are of note: schools having students who achieve a specified level of improvement are paid a per-student financial bonus; and an independent authority administers the tests.
The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) has introduced ‘on demand’ literacy testing whereby schools can acquire appropriate assessment instrumentation by downloading the tests from a Departmental website (VCAA, 2008). This ambitious initiative is intended to assist teachers to monitor progress by enhancing their technical capacity to do so.

DET has, for a number of years, provided schools with access to performance data for their students from the WALNA program through the Data Club. This is a nationally significant initiative ahead of its time, but many school systems in Australia and elsewhere are still grappling with appropriate use of the results from a large scale testing program. Schools are provided with software that allows staff to look at trends over time, and consider whether individual students have achieved academically as expected. The software contains appropriate caveats against simplistic interpretation of results; however, it is a potentially useful tool for evidence-based decision making at the school level.

For reasons explained above, it would appear that the Data Club assessment instrumentation (WALNA) should be upgraded so that teachers can reduce the interval between assessment occasions thereby obtaining more robust estimates of the students’ academic progress.

The two-year interval between national testing occasions is too long for the purpose of monitoring individual student progress. For this purpose, schools need to have access to assessment instruments that indicate whether students are meeting proficiency standards for each year of schooling. Such tests should be made available and administered by schools on a voluntary basis, at a time that suits them, and to assess students for whom testing is appropriate. As this is a large undertaking, DET should consider collaborating with other state education departments and assessment authorities already working on such projects and, in doing so, share the developmental costs.

**Monitoring student behaviour**

The Student Achievement Information System (SAIS) has also developed into a comprehensive tool for maintaining school records and issuing reports on student behaviour and performance. With regard to student behaviour, each semester teachers can submit ratings on a number of dimensions of the student behaviour, that bear on cooperation, confidence and effort. These behaviours are indicative of engagement. Trajectories can be produced for each student over a three-semester period and compared with the aggregated responses from other schools. Attendance records can also be entered and reported.

*The student behaviour component of the SAIS should be enhanced and a scale constructed that would allow the recognition of significant changes in behaviour over time.*

There are several ways in which these analytic tools could be further enhanced. They should be used to help school staff members identify, on a case-by-case basis, who is failing to make progress, whether classroom behaviour is a contributing factor, and what changes are necessary.

**Tracking students**

**Unique student identifiers**

The Pipeline study has shown there to be considerable student mobility, resulting in schools often having incomplete data for a considerable number of students. In order for schools to map student progress from year to year, students need a unique numeric identifier so that information about an individual student can be linked with data from previous schools attended.

The use of unique student identifiers raises issues of security and privacy. The adoption of a national system has been under consideration by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) since 2005. Queensland and Tasmania have their own system already in place. Victoria is trialling a system during 2009. Given that other states have already proceeded, DET should not wait for agreement on a national system. It should fast-track the adoption of a similar system.
The system could be utilised for an additional purpose. The Pipeline study has shown that there is a dispersal of students at the end of Year 7, following their transition from primary to high school. The evidence from the study suggests that market forces are accentuating the concentration of students in particular schools according to their behaviour and academic performance. It is of considerable strategic importance that DET establishes a system which enables it to monitor broad trends of this kind. The adoption of a unique student identifier would enable policy makers to recognise trends in parental choice while at the same time protecting the anonymity of the individuals involved.

There is a high level of student mobility within the school system. Sometimes the school is informed that a student is leaving and their destination is disclosed. In other cases the students simply disappear. The latter group often contains those students who are having trouble at school or at home. Indeed, there were numbers of cases during the course of the Pipeline study where staff members invested considerable time and effort to assist particular students who were struggling, recognised improvement, and then discovered that the student had suddenly left the school and ‘vanished’.

The focus on the ‘here and now’ robs teachers of the satisfaction of recognising the cumulative value of their work. Teachers may make a huge effort to assist a student to make exceptional improvement in behaviour and performance, only to see the student leave. Teachers lose touch and there is no expectation of feedback on how students have adjusted to their new school.

DET should adopt a system of unique identifiers, with appropriate security and privacy safeguards that would facilitate the mapping of student behaviour and performance and the linking of records when students change schools.

Supporting schools

Learning from successful schools

The Pipeline study observed school differences in the level of unproductive behaviour reported by teachers. The levels were moderately related to the school’s Socio-economic Index (SEI) score. Some of the schools with low SEIs had much better than expected levels of productive behaviour and achievement. This may be because the SEI is an imperfect measure, or because some low SES schools have been able to manage behaviour more effectively than others. Both possibilities may be true.

Some of the principals in the Pipeline Project were confident they had introduced new programs and operating procedures that had improved student behaviour and performance. Throughout the whole system many schools are likely that to have made similar improvements. While the evidence suggests that home-grown solutions to problems are hard to universalise, acknowledging and publishing accounts of what the schools have achieved promotes a professional culture thereby spurring other schools to explore what they might also achieve. Such dissemination and accumulation of knowledge requires a research-minded attitude and should not be confused with marketing and public relations.

DET should develop its capacity to identify schools that achieve higher than expected NAPLAN results; and in collaboration with the schools, systematically examine the circumstances that appear to have enabled that performance, and provide a means for the schools to disseminate the strategies they have employed.

Extra-classroom support

As indicated earlier in this report, the construction of a productive school climate in which there is a high level of engagement is seen as the responsibility of school staff members, and it assumed that they collectively have the capacity to achieve such a climate. The Pipeline study suggests that, while schools accept this responsibility, much more targeted support is warranted in order to achieve a quantum improvement across the whole school system.

Reference was made earlier in this chapter to the adoption of a more individualised, case-management approach to students behaving unproductively and performing poorly. This initiative can only be successful, in the long term, if schools have additional capacity. The schools in most need of such an approach are likely to find it exceptionally difficult to bring relevant staff together for the necessary amount of time. It is a resourcing issue.
Schools also have access to specialist support staff depending on their circumstances. This staff includes psychologists, speech pathologists and chaplains. Some are based in regional or central offices whereas others are appointed to schools. Generally, they are involved with individual students who are experiencing some kind of personal problem. Their successful intervention can make a difference to the level of engagement in classrooms since a single student can cause a high level of disruption and undermine the norms that support productive behaviour.

However, it is likely that much of the disengagement reported in the study is more endemic to the school or classroom culture, rather than being the product of one student’s classroom behaviour. The challenges confronting teachers may spring from the home, the curriculum, or the pedagogy teachers are employing, as well as the inner psychological states of students. It is a tall order to expect a consultant to be expert in such a wide range of areas, unless specifically trained and of relevant experience.

Some professional development programs have addressed student engagement and sought to extend the range of strategies to be employed by principals and classroom practitioners; DET should review the success of these programs. Additionally, it should review the roles and responsibilities of consultants and ancillary staff to ensure they can contribute to the amelioration of disengagement in a consistent and appropriate way.

**Strengthening the capacity for out-of-school intervention**

Teachers believe that for many students the explanation for their unproductive behaviour is tied to events that happen outside the school, or in conjunction with what happens at school. Family trauma of the kind directly or indirectly involving the students has a large bearing on their behaviour and performance at school.

Parents (and carers) also play a key role in shaping student beliefs about the value of education and of doing as well as possible at school. The likelihood that they will be motivated and engaged is in direct proportion to the extent of family members and peers effectively supporting their purposeful involvement in learning at home and in school.

Schools schedule events to which parents are invited but they are often poorly attended. Contact with parents is made through the principal or a designated staff member, sometimes on the school site and sometimes at the parent’s residence. For a small number of schools, the location of social work and medical agencies on site can strengthen the capacity to liaise with parents. For most schools, staff members must operate in the grey area between educator and social worker.

Principals report that it to be almost impossible to acquire the support of qualified social workers to help them solve problems unless such events are thought to involve violence or sexual misconduct. Thus they are left to their own resources, the main impediment to support acquisition appears to be the inadequate funding of these agencies. Sometimes non-government agencies, including churches, partially fill this gap.

_Schools with high levels of unproductive behaviour should have the capacity to deploy an appropriately trained staff member to maintain direct contact between the students’ carers and the school._

The unproductive behaviour of some students appears to arise because of over-indulgence rather than neglect. Many of the disengaged students simply do not respond to instruction and are incredulous or unresponsive when pressure is applied by teachers. This pattern is approaching endemic proportions according to teachers who participated in the focus group discussions. Parents, for various reasons, find it easier to gratify their children than to inculcate habits of persistence, patience and respect for others. Schools need to be supported by parents when they attempt to develop these productive attitudes and habits of mind.

In the field of health, large-scale campaigns are waged to promote healthy lifestyles. Obesity in children is the focus of a current campaign there being constant attention drawn to the problem in the mass media; yet the development of positive attitudes towards schooling is just as important, with the promotion of education always being given the same priority as, for example, health promotion.

_The State Government should launch a parent education campaign, using the mass media and copying relevant health promotion initiatives, that illustrates how parents can contribute to the success of their children at school._
Conclusion

This study has shown that, in general, students who perform well in one year are likely to perform well in the next; and that the behaviour of large numbers of students is consistently conducive to academic success. On the other hand, both the behaviour and performance of a substantial proportion of students change significantly from year to year, some for the better and some for the worse. Of the students whose behaviour undermines their chances of reaching their potential at school, some make a rapid recovery; others have good and bad years; and still others show no signs of improvement.

A relatively small group of students exhibit behaviour so extreme that school staff members have no choice but to take whatever action to deal with the behaviour and to nullify its impact on other students. It is towards these students that most of the school’s behaviour management effort is directed. In the unproductive behaviour of many of these students, their behaviour can be attributed, in part or whole, to events that occur out of school. Schools need additional, appropriately trained personnel, who can liaise with parents or carers.

However, there is a much larger group of students who do not threaten the wellbeing of others, or draw particular attention to themselves, but whose disengagement from schoolwork is significantly restricting their academic progress. These students under-perform on academic assessments, but because they do not threaten others they tend to escape the attention they warrant.

Disengagement from schooling is a problem in all developed countries. There is no single solution to the problem of disengagement because there are multiple causes. The homes from which children come and the quality of parenting which sees school success as neither valued nor supported, contributes to disengagement. Governments should support schools with regular parent education programs. However, schools also bear responsibility; but they can only exercise that responsibility where they have the capacity to do so - a whole-school capacity.

Australian governments have agreed to a series of national partnerships that will direct additional funding to schools serving low socio-economic communities, especially if literacy and numeracy outcomes will be improved. There is an opportunity to focus interventions devised through this program so schools with a critical mass of students who are unmotivated and disengaged from schooling are supported.

Schools need the technology and the expertise that will enable staff members to keep the trajectories of such students under surveillance, and to respond to each student at risk of failure. This is not a radical recommendation, since the basis of such a system is already in place. The evidence from the Pipeline Project suggests the need for the refinement and an extension of this capacity.

One of the apparent weaknesses of the existing arrangements for recording, reporting and analysing behaviour related to academic performance is that the educational rationale for their application is not made explicit, even though the manuals describing how the systems can be used appear to be of a high standard. The Pipeline Project findings suggest that the DET has the means of making both case management and the monitoring of student progress outstanding strengths of the government school system.

Some of the suggestions for action made in this report are deliberately couched in broad terms: further consideration is required if any of the suggestions is to be transformed into an action plan. They also call for the pooling of the experience and expertise found among principals and experienced teachers.

Following through on these suggestions will require both a reframing of priorities, and the development of a sophisticated understanding of the nature of student unproductive behaviour and its relationship to student performance. Improving information systems, proposed in this report, will only have a positive impact if the particular information needed to guide decisions is placed in the hands of staff members with the training, understanding and time to put it into effect. Promoting academic engagement will only improve student outcomes if the strategies that might work can be integrated into the ongoing work of schools. Urging parental support of students will only yield positive results if schools have the capacity to mobilise parental commitment.

There is no simple checklist of things to do in order to improve student behaviour and performance. Educators at all levels of the school system should be wary of ‘experts’ who claim to have all the answers packaged into some new program. In the end, the likelihood of success remains an individual school’s overall capacity - measured not only by their financial and staffing resources, but also by their shared commitment to make a significant difference in tandem with their power to change what needs to be changed.
References


Appendices

3.1 Student behaviour checklist (*yellow form*)
3.2 Pipeline project: September review (*blue form*)
3.3 Transition from Year 6 to Year 7
## Appendix 3.1: Student Behaviour Checklist (Yellow Form)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School:</th>
<th>Year Level:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher:</td>
<td>Date: MAY, 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PLEASE INDICATE WITH A TICK ✓ WHICH (IF ANY) OF THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES OF UNPRODUCTIVE CLASSROOM BEHAVIOURS ARE EXHIBITED BY EACH STUDENT**

*A tick should be recorded if you believe these behaviours are impeding the academic progress of the student or other students in their class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPID NO.</th>
<th>STUDENT SURNAME</th>
<th>FIRST NAME</th>
<th>Aggressive</th>
<th>Non-compliant</th>
<th>Disruptive</th>
<th>Inattentive</th>
<th>Erratic</th>
<th>Impulsive</th>
<th>Unmotivated</th>
<th>Unresponsive</th>
<th>Unprepared</th>
<th>Irregular attendance</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
## Appendix 3.2: Pipeline Project September Review (Blue Form)

### Pipeline Project: September Review, 2008

Please answer the following questions regarding all students who are in your class, and also participating in the Pipeline Project in 2008.

### Student Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teacher's name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Subject (if applicable):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Name</th>
<th>PP ID No</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>1. ESC Inclusion?</th>
<th>2. ESL</th>
<th>3. Formal Diagnosis?</th>
<th>4. Suspended</th>
<th>5. With reference to the Western Australian benchmark (BM) for NUMERACY, this student appears to perform...</th>
<th>6. With reference to the Western Australian benchmark (BM) for LITERACY, this student appears to perform...</th>
<th>7. Has this student's behaviour changed since the checklist was completed in May?</th>
<th>8. If the student is continuing to exhibit unproductive behaviour(s), which behaviour has been the most dominant since May?</th>
<th>9. For the students noted by you in no. 8, to what extent does their unproductive behaviour contribute to this academic under-performance?</th>
<th>10. Overall, does the student appear to enjoy doing the schoolwork you assign?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                |          |         |             | below BM | slightly above BM | well above BM | re / shape | nearly always | often | some- | almost never | never | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never | almost | hardly | always | never }
Appendix 3.3: Transition from Year 7 to Year 8

As noted in Chapter 4, the 2005 Year 6 cohort progressed from Year 7 to Year 8 at the beginning of 2007. At this critical transition point, parents make a decision whether to enrol their child at the nearest local high school or look further afield.

Clearly many parents from the Pipeline primary schools exercised their choice and enrolled their child in a government or non-government school, other than the designated Pipeline high school. In some cases, geography and public transport may have been factors. So also are the high school’s curriculum and reputation likely to have influenced their choice. Altogether, 64 per cent of the cohort opted to attend non-Pipeline high schools. This represents a high rate of attrition.

Analyses of the 2006 WALNA test data from 2006, when the students were in Year 7, indicate that students who attended their ‘local’ Pipeline high school were more likely to perform at a lower level on the WALNA tests than students who attended other high schools after finishing their primary education in 2006. Table Y shows that average difference reading performance in 2006, prior to making the transition, between Pipeline and non-Pipeline schools was statistically significant.
Table Y: Reading performance of students on 2006 WALNA tests of students in Year 7 according to whether they attended the local cluster high school or another high school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attended</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pipeline high schools</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>409.23</td>
<td>72.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other high schools</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>445.33</td>
<td>76.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Difference in means is statistically significant at p < .01

Table Z shows a statistically significant difference for numeracy between the two groups.

Table Z: Numeracy performance of students on 2006 WALNA tests of students in Year 7 according to whether they attended the local cluster high school or another high school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attended</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pipeline high schools</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>448.26</td>
<td>68.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other high schools</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>476.42</td>
<td>82.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Difference in means is statistically significant at p < .01

The pattern of differences is confirmed by the reports of classroom teachers of the performance of students in their class while in Year 7.

Teachers rated the Year 7 students in September according to whether the students were performing below the benchmark standard, around the benchmark standard or above the standard in terms of their literacy and numeracy performance. For each performance area, the students attending their local cluster schools were considered by their teachers to be performing below the standard (Chi-Square, p < .05). This result corroborates the official WALNA result which the teachers did not have access to when they made these judgments.

Not only were they more likely to be performing at a lower standard but they were also more likely to be performing below their capacity. Thirty-five percent of students attending cluster schools were considered by teachers to be under-performing, whereas only 24 per cent of students attending other schools were identified as underperformers. The Chi-Square was significant at p < 0.5.

Teachers were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived students to be enjoying their set work. Students who went on to attend their local Pipeline high schools were less likely to be considered to be enjoying their set work in Year 7 than those moving to other schools (Chi-Square was significant at p < .01). Of the former 36.4 per cent 'nearly always' enjoyed their work whereas for the latter group slightly more than half (52.4 per cent) were rated by their teachers to be enjoying their set work.

The overall differences between the two groups can be summarised in Table A below. It is clear that there has been a ‘leakage’ during the transition of more able and better behaved students to schools outside their immediate geographic intake area.
Table A: Year 7 differences in 2006 among students bound for local Pipeline high schools and other high schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 7 results</th>
<th>Attended local Pipeline high schools in 2007 (n = 169)</th>
<th>Attended'other' high schools in 2007 (n = 303)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WALNA Reading performance</td>
<td>Mean = 409</td>
<td>Mean = 445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALNA Numeracy performance</td>
<td>Mean = 448</td>
<td>Mean = 476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour having high negative impact</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judged to be under-performing</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying school work</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This result was an unintended outcome. Nevertheless the movement of students from school to school can have a huge impact on a school’s capacity to deliver a quality curriculum. Schools that draw more able and well-behaved students actually gain a real resource. Those that lose these students suffer a real loss that makes their job so much harder. It is clear that these trends should be closely monitored as they could well explain why schools unexpectedly perform better or worse than expected.