

When a School Offers Hope: An Initial Report of Research in a Special School for Behaviour Disordered Students

Roger J. Vallance
Australian Catholic University
Roger.vallance@acu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper reports the first findings of an ethnographic research and evaluation project undertaken over two years in a school for behaviour disordered students in Sydney. These students are at-risk of school exclusion, and have frequently experienced short-term exclusion from more than one school. The John Berne School is the only such school within the Catholic system, and it is privately run by a Catholic Religious Order. This paper reports the experiences and cognitions of a graduating class of students, Yr 10 2009. In 2009 there were 12 students, all but one agreeing to be involved in this research. This project explores their understandings of their recent history and educational prospects, as well as their reflections on their own personal growth, using pen-and-paper survey and an individual interview. Additionally, this paper includes the reflections of a small group of parents who chose to be part of the research data collection by participating in a face-to-face interview. The interview data were analysed using NVivo 8. Results from the project indicate that the students marked their development as individuals as well as the achievement of the School Certificate, and expressed high regard for employment or further study. A number of students were able to reflect on significant behaviour changes in the previous couple of years while at this special school. Students identify the central roles of good relationships with staff and a diversified curriculum in helping them towards achievement at school. This research is significant because it focuses on a much under-researched group, Special Schools. Special Schools within the Catholic education system are seldom researched, this study being the first such conducted in New South Wales. This Special School is focused on addressing the educational disadvantage of a marginalised group; students with learning disabilities, behaviour disorders and contingent personal, family and social issues.

Introduction

These students are in your face, often loud and using the language of the street. Most are here because their previous school or schools cannot cope with their violence and aggression, absenteeism and erratic behaviours. These are at-risk students; in great danger of falling through the cracks in schooling, not acquiring basic literacy, numeracy and social skills (Livock, 2005). The John Berne School (The John Berne School, 2010) is for behaviour disordered students (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2007). The majority of students are male, aged thirteen to sixteen years in Years Eight to Ten, with a few Year Seven students. Not surprisingly, the language of the students is frequently that of the street, especially in moments of dissension or if an argument gets heated, although the 'F-bomb' is discouraged. There are no uniforms and there is seldom homework so students do not carry school materials in backpacks. Several students arrive by taxi – the only means of bringing these students to school where public transport is inherently too threatening or too stimulating their problems to be possible as regular transport.

While the New South Wales Department of Education and Training runs a number of special schools, including schools for conduct and behaviour disordered students (NSW Department Education and Training, 2010), the Sydney Catholic Education Office does not conduct any such schools. The John Berne School is conducted by the Marist Brothers, a Catholic Religious Order of men, in Sydney's inner western suburbs. The teachers are on a first name basis with the students and each other. Students arrive and are greeted by name by the several teachers who are in the yard. Staff take their morning tea and lunch in the yard with students. There are no gates or fences, and the loudest noises heard during class time

are traffic noises from Parramatta Road three hundred meters away or the occasional overhead aeroplane headed for nearby Mascot airport.

The school Principal and his executive have explicitly approved the use of the School name in this research report. They have made this decision so that other Special Schools might better relate to the context and processes described. The school staff have received a final draft of this paper and approved its contents and publication.

This article is the first of a series of planned articles. The research on which this paper is based commenced in the latter half of 2009 and is conducted as non-participant ethnographic research. The research included initial meetings with staff to scope the research, discuss research methods and instruments, and to ensure that staff are involved and supportive of the research activities. This means that staff were consulted and had input into parent, student and staff data collection instruments (Burgess, 1989). The research methods accepted are discussed in the next section.

The research was instigated by the request of the Principal and his executive to develop data about the school's progress over its twelve years of operation and to suggest some areas for the school's strategic planning. The research questions include: What has Berne achieved for its students?, How might Berne better serve its students?, and What does Berne need to improve for its students? It is anticipated that the research will conclude in 2011 after addressing the perceptions of the wider school community, including volunteers and work experience links, people from the local community who interact with the students; ex-students and their parents; present students and their parents; staff and former staff of the school; and the one previous Principal. The research in the wider community will employ the same questions regarding the John Berne School's provisions for its students. This article is based on data collected from pen-and-paper surveys and individual interviews from students and their parents as the students were preparing to leave the school at the completion of Yr 10 in 2009.

This article makes two significant contributions. Firstly, it reports the perceptions of the students of the efficacy of the school and its culture. Secondly, this paper reports the processes of this special school from the perspective of its graduating students in terms of their understanding of their future and the challenges that lie ahead of them at their age of sixteen to eighteen years. Lastly, this article reports future perspectives to the ongoing efficacy of the program through the perceptions of the students.

The School Program

The John Berne School program is not the ordinary mainstream school experience. The main subjects are taught, although there is not a full range of elective subjects. Students do sit the NAPLAN tests. The requirements of the NSW School Certificate are addressed, those exams are presented and most students do attain the School Certificate. Students attend classes in small groups, which would usually not exceed five students. There is quiet movement as individuals move to literacy intensive lessons, or attend scheduled appointments with counsellors or psychologists.

The school is small, intentionally so. Unlike some schools, this school commences the year relatively low in pupil numbers, and as students in mainstream Catholic schools find themselves increasingly at odds with school expectations and capacities, enquiries grow. The school conducts interviews with parents and potential students, accesses where possible previous school records as well as its own psychological assessments. Individual contracts between the school and students and parents are the norm.

Many of the students of John Berne suffer a range of mental health problems. These problems may be part of the reason for their disordered conduct, and may result from previous traumas, including violent crime, and family circumstances (Jackson & Finney, 2002). Individual counselling is an integral part of the curriculum and counsellors are involved in all aspects of the school, except discipline. Right from the beginning, each student is assigned a counsellor and ordinarily this relationship will be maintained throughout the student's time at Berne.

Two features bookend the school day. The morning commences with breakfast, served in the community room. The canteen staff provide a high protein breakfast each morning so

that each student will be able to start the school day adequately fed. The day finishes early for the students so they depart and travel before the majority of students from neighbouring high schools are released from class.

Students, despite their histories of non-compliance in mainstream schools, have a high attendance rate. Last year, 2009, the overall average attendance was 86% of all student days. There are several aspects of the school week that are different. Fridays are characterised by 'skills' and 'excursions'. Skills are those activities conducted in small groups that include care of several garden patches, activities in art, woodwork or photography which are hands-on and activity intense. Excursions in the latter part of Fridays might be outings to a cinema, a place of historical or cultural interest, or visiting an aged care facility. Excursions are practical lessons of social conduct and ways to behave, while also attempting to erase the stigma of attending a special school. Years Nine and Ten also have work experience of a week's duration each school term, and Years Eight, Nine and Ten undertake a camp or adventure activity in year groups each term for which any Year Seven students join Year Eight. These camps are graded in difficulty and challenge and are attended by the year group staff as well as trained facilitators.

So here, so say if you were at a normal school, mainstream, get up Monday to Friday continuous work. Here you have only got Monday to Thursday you have got normal work here, then Friday you have got an excursion. So for at my old school that would be a very rare thing to get excursion each Friday. And even here, camps, every time you get, every term you get a camp, every single term. So you ... um, when I was here in year eight we went to the Gerroa Beach house. So I went there term two again, term three was Mulgoa camp. Then Gerroa again, three times. Then we used to go, to year nine we have, we got over in Kangaroo Valley then term two we didn't have one. Term three was a snow camp. And ... Mulgoa ... so we got all different types of camps, you know. (Cooper)

The focus is on modelling supportive relationships between students and staff, between staff and other staff, and between friends of the school and students (McGrath & Noble, 2010). Work experience, camps and excursions are significant parts of the curriculum, not only in time allocated and frequency, but also in their efficacy. These 'out-of-school' activities are deeply embedded in the curriculum which is focused on building trust, raising students' sense of achievement and progressively managing success in interpersonal encounters which had formerly been marked by conflict. The work experience program is a central aspect of raising student self-esteem. Yr 9 and Yr 10 students attend a week of work experience per term. Initially, this needs to be structured by the staff coordinator, and in the first instances not all students are keen. But the growing sense of efficacy that the work experience brings sharpens the motivation to work at the difficult lessons of school. The learning at school is 'for something' and so increases engagement, as Hufton, Elliott and Illushim (2002) report findings across several countries. Working at lessons will make one employable and that lesson is firmly taught in the frequent work experience encounters. Indeed, there is some transnational evidence that the value which students place on school for their future benefit is closely associated with those students' in-class engagement (Elliott, Hufton, Illushin, & Lauchlan, 2001).

Methods

The research was conducted with Ethics Approval of the school authority and Australian Catholic University. School staff were consulted regarding instruments and plans for the research from the beginning, the research proposal being ratified by the school staff prior to commencement in order to enable the inclusion of some stakeholder feedback (Mark, Eyssell, & Campbell, 1999; Penslar, 1995; Rowan, 2000). Staff suggestions were incorporated and this resulted in a broader sample to respond to stakeholder requests (Burgess, 1989). This research is a single instrumental case study (Yin, 2003) using an ethnographic approach to the research site (Woods, 1996). The researcher usually attends the school once a week during school term, as well as other occasions as required by circumstances, school events or appointments to meet potential participants (Woods, 1996).

The main research instruments have been observation notes, a pen-and-paper survey form and face-to-face interviews. Observations have been undertaken at least once a week for most of the school day, aside from times used to conduct interviews, or as required by school activities. These non participatory observations are recorded as field notes after the event (Wolcott, 2005) so that students and staff are not confronted by 'note taking on a clip board'. The surveys of students were approved by staff and the surveys were conducted by senior staff in order to minimise disturbance and change in the students' classes. Consensual interviews with adults and Yr 10 students were conducted individually, the digital audio record transcribed and input as data (Dohan & Sánchez-Jankowski, 1998) to NVivo ver.8 (QSR International, 2009).

The Yr 10 students were interviewed individually, given Informed Consent Forms to read, query and sign (Jones & Stanley, 2008). All student interviews were conducted in a school interview room familiar to the students. Volunteer parents were contacted by phone and interviews were conducted in the place nominated by the parents, usually their home, at a time convenient to them. Informed Consent Forms were offered, explained and signed when interview arrangements were satisfactory. Field notes were recorded after interviews and these field notes were used to inform the data analysis. All quotes are verbatim from the surveys or interview transcripts, with the minimum punctuation required for understanding the spoken message. Quotes are fair representations of the views expressed by the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). All names used are pseudonyms assigned by the researcher to protect confidentiality. The pseudonyms are assigned by replacing the participant's name, on an alphabetic list, with a next highest frequency birth name of that gender (Townsend, 2010). The data are accepted as the voluntary constructions of the participants in response to questions regarding their experiences and perceptions of the school.

Gaining the trust of the students to engage with the interview process was not unproblematic (Hill, 2006; Laenen, 2009). Students in Special Schools are frequent clients of counsellors, experienced targets of many interviews both disciplinary and helpful, and often distrustful of new adults in their world (Solomon & Rogers, 2001). The support of the teachers and the counselling staff was more likely a larger factor in students' willing engagement with this research than the author's interview skills.

This paper concerns itself with the perceptions of the cohort of 2009 graduating Yr 10 students and their parents. Subsequent reports will details teacher and community understandings of the school and its contribution in the area of special education.

How students describe themselves

These Yr 10 students are aware when the John Berne School may be their last opportunity for schooling. While the students acknowledge the role of the school in accepting and working with them, few students acknowledge the work of their previous school, or even their parents, in providing access and introduction to the school, and in the case of parents to paying the standard Sydney Catholic Education Office fees. In cases of parental hardship these fees have been negotiated and sometimes waived. These students suffer a range of social, emotional and disruptive behavioural problems which present in behaviours like anger, depression, social and work avoidance: mental health issues well known to affect education outcomes (Jackson & Finney, 2002) not least due to resulting poor patterns of attendance (Kearney, 2008).

Many of the students had experiences of anger and violence at previous schools.

.... like even if I didn't want to fight I was ready to fight. Yeah if they just wanted to go I would go. There would be a good fight (Jack)

Cooper recounts being quite out of control, and frequently smashing furniture to get himself suspended again and out of an environment he found threatening.

So, I did my school wasn't just right for me, just wasn't the right place to be. Just couldn't cope with the students, teachers, you know, couldn't manage my anger with anyone. Used to snap in a second when anyone said something. Even in a joke people say, I just get angry at it.

(Cooper)

As Cooper further explains, he has been able to overcome some of these problems, while recognising that the mainstream school experience was not a helpful environment for him at that time.

Yeah, as soon as I got kicked out from there I lost trust from my parents they were like, they don't talk to you, neglected you know. Came here, a few terms it went on, went on, trust gain you know, with the parents again. Because at that school, you know, things just wasn't right for me. And I came here and I have lasted three years, you know, and no problem. So mainstream I thought wasn't just right for me.

(Cooper)

The Berne students arrive because of problem behaviours in previous schools. These problem behaviours can be effectively addressed and students report how they can grow into patterns of behaviour that are more functional and less conflict-ridden. The means that the school uses to achieve these behaviour changes are now discussed.

What students say about their schooling

The John Berne School attempts to provide a supportive learning environment that is flexible enough that student can feel successful and that they belong. Students do consistently report that they like attending Berne. They report that their marks and general sense of achievement have improved. Furthermore, students report that the activities and processes of learning at the school are better, within their capacities and enjoyable.

On Fridays we go on excursions or do work around the school, finish off your projects, like in wood works, so that's good. And what else? I started learning a lot better at school. Like usually, at other schools I didn't, I would never pick up on everything. This way, how they taught you at Berne, like my marks and stuff ended up improving heaps. And my reading, my maths skills, everything together just went up.

(Thomas)

There are still problems that occur, and students acknowledge that they are a part of those problems. Yet there is a respect that students generally have for the staff. This respect is built upon a history of practical caring. One student recounts that the Principal of the school made personal efforts to get into contact with him:

One time I was out, I ran, ran away from home and he [the Principal] called me, where are you and stuff? "Come to school. Come and we will talk" and stuff and I did. And he was asking me what's wrong and stuff and I was telling him and ... like we sorted it out and I ended up going back home and things. Still, things are still rough but they are better than what it was.

(Thomas)

Students report that the school has a different 'feel' to it. The school feels friendly and fellow students and staff are positive and warmly welcoming. Teachers are addressed by first names, there is no school uniform, no school bells, and appearances are casual.

Like it doesn't feel like it's school. It feels like, there is people around it just feels like supportive and stuff. Like how they do different things for you to help you and stuff. It's not like schools, like you can't have a one on one with a teacher like you can here. If you need that extra help you can have one on one, you know. Yeah, it's a bit more open and more support.

(Isabella)

Individualised help is easier in small classes, and at Berne the usual class size is no greater than five students, although in the Individual Learning Area work is individualised by the coordinating teacher. The students report that teachers do take the time to be friendly, to help with work and to be open.

all the kids like seemed alright. Because I got, I spoke to a few like some were in the office when I was coming for the interview I spoke to them. Seemed like alright kids and yeah, so I just thought, and the teachers were like how are you going, and real nice and stuff and caring and which made me also want to come here as well.

(Lachlan)

William can reflect that over the time he has been in far fewer fights, and what was once physical is now verbal argument. He reports that instead of fighting he tries to solve a problem. When asked how this change has come about, he says:

The teachers trust you around here. Like they ... they tell me, when I first came here they go to me, you should always, if you are angry or you need time out you ask the question. You try to resolve the problem with the kids and if it doesn't work you go to the principal and you talk about it, the principal to bring the kid in with you and talk about it. See if we can still resolve the problem. So that's how it all started to help.

(William)

Lachlan had a history of persistent school refusal, truancy and non-attendance. He speaks about his attendance record then and now, and what the school has brought about:

It Berne mightn't work for everyone but it works for me. At my old school I woke up, didn't go some days, couldn't be bothered, didn't want to, hated the school. I can pretty much every single day wake up and ... and like I will be tired and I don't want to go but ... I want to go because it's definitely a good place.

I: And the last school probably took you about 15 minutes to get to. Yeah.

I: And like how far, how long a journey is it to get to here each day? I get asked this a fair bit because I am from like Cronulla way. Yeah so ... it takes a while. But I couldn't tell you how long, I just can't think but yeah, it's what two trains and a bus but it does take a while but it's worth it, every single bit. Yeah. I have to get up at 6.00 and leave by 7.00 so ... ten to seven but yeah.

I: And so what time will you get home? 4.00.

I: Leaving here about what?

2.10. Leaving here. Yeah.

(Lachlan)

From being a persistent school refuser, Lachlan now travels two hours each way to school. And in the conversation as it developed, he informed me that he had not missed a day at Berne in the last two terms, speaking in Term 4, 2009.

At the end of their Yr 10 experience at John Berne, students are able to articulate at least some of their story and reasons for coming to John Berne Special School. These same students are able to relate how the Berne experience has changed them. Students report changes in violent patterns of school behaviour, greatly improved school attendance and possibly mostly importantly, affiliation with Berne School teachers and processes. This affiliation, as opposed to earlier alienation, has changed students' prospects and ambitions as the next section will explore.

As the students prepare to graduate

For some students there is a clear sense of progress. Thomas recognises that all is not perfect and that he has been slow to get the message. Thomas had left the school in Yr 8 and returned within a year because his TAFE ambitions were not realised through his own lack of attendance and effort.

Learnt life skills pretty much. All sorts of things, how to handle situations. But like it took me a while to get it, get it into my head. I am slowly getting there. (Thomas)

Cooper speaks strongly that he sees himself as a changed person. In fact, he would say that these recent experiences have turned his life around.

I say mate, I like how I have changed, you know. I had a major change to make. Like, I like this, I talk to them like, so what are you talking about, I never done all that you know, I just cut it out, you know, I just talk crap to them, I say what, that Cooper doesn't exist anymore I would say.

(Cooper)

Jack speaks about his and his mates' difficulties and how the school has helped. This help is not only in academic matters but also social, family and personal matters as well, through the individual work that each student undertakes with a counsellor.

Berne works in a way that it's like, they are trying to help, they help kids which are at risk. But a lot of us kids here have had school life problems. And a lot of us, I will admit I am a lot, like a lot of us are, I am not much, a lot of us are going through a lot of family issues. But Berne is really good at helping that out. They are really good at helping out your family issues and talking to you then talking to your family. But I had my counsellor save me so many times from being kicked out that it's not funny. And if, I reckon that if it wasn't for my counsellor I wouldn't be living at home. Yeah.

(Jack)

Some sense of the developed relationships formed can be gained when observing the visits by ex-students. It would be a rare week without one or more ex-students returning, unannounced and simply walking into the school, to visit teachers. The views and memories of ex-students will be a later paper from this research.

Thomas, Cooper and Jack reflect that they are conscious of the changes that have occurred in their lives and perceptions of themselves. These young men do not claim that the agency is all their own, as Jack reports above: 'They are really good at helping out your family issues...' acknowledging that the assistance was there and was offered over time, even if they recognise that 'it took a while to get it' (Thomas). And, as Jack mentions, the other part of the lives of these young men is their families and the quality of their relationships with their families. The family focus will be addressed briefly in the next section.

How parents describe what has happened

The full survey and interview of parents will not be completed until late in 2010. These comments come from parent interviews and surveys of the Yr 10 students who graduated in December 2009. Three parents were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of the John Berne School and how they perceive their sons benefiting from the Berne experience. Interviews were 40 to 50 minutes in duration, conducted in their home outside work hours, recorded and transcribed for textual analysis.

The parents expressed high satisfaction with the program and activities of the school. A few parents expressed some concern that the school did not give homework or was not as strict as they liked. Surprisingly, some parents seemed to be little aware of the ordinary teaching activities of the school and focused on the issues relating to camps and excursions. These issues frequently involved time away from home and expenses.

Each parent was asked to summarise their experience of the school for their child. One parent simply said, "Berne gave my son back to me!" After recounting problems at home, truancy and lots of family disagreements, this parent spoke of the parenting program the school runs and eloquently stated her view of the impact of the school helping to restore relationships in the family and offer her son a means of self-improvement and future employment.

The latter part of this article attempts to situate these concrete experiences of Berne students and their families in the concepts of student self-esteem and the quality of student-teacher interactions.

What works for these students

Wang, Heartel and Walberg, in a meta analysis towards a knowledge base for school learning, propose that the significant instructional interactions include the quality of student-teacher interactions, as well as the ongoing management of the classroom as a learning environment (1993, p.277). Earlier remarks of Thomas, Isabella and Lachlan show that the students experience trust and support from the staff. Jack recognises the support received

from school counsellors and further notes that the classroom interactions are so important to give him the confidence to strive in class:

A lot of the counselling from the school and getting like, well, I would say a lot of the counselling but just the environment, like being in the classroom with the teachers, they are so welcoming, they are not your normal teacher, sit down and shut up, do your work. If you don't understand it they will just stand there for an hour and explain it to you until you get it. At a normal school they would explain it to you for five minutes, if you don't get it you repeat it, you're hopeless. (Jack)

While not accepting that Jack's memories of mainstream classes are normative, Jack does speak as one who has failed in mainstream classes and been marginalised due to disordered conduct in those classes. Past conflicts with teachers do influence school performance (Stipek & Miles, 2008). Self-efficacy as a learner is situation specific (Solomon & Rogers, 2001) and can be influenced by context, the classroom and the school environment. "Building a trusting student/staff relationship, offering a second chance, confidence building, and eventual empowerment" (Livock, 2004, p.5) are the ideals of helping such learners. One of the barriers to be overcome is the negative beliefs about education (Carter, 2006), and one of the strong means is a sense of belonging, that students feel accepted within the school environment. A policy of the school is to address all problems, wherever possible, on the day. A daily Behaviour Management Record for each student is part of tracking progress, and the whole staff group reviews student progress daily. Hence issues are not carried over to the next day in order that 'each day is a clean start'. By this means, the staff attempt to offer each student a second chance each day. It is one way to live the school motto "Hope Always".

During the interviews conducted with the Yr 10 students, every student mentioned that they viewed the future positively. The views expressed centred on their hopes for the future: a job, an apprenticeship or further education, be it TAFE or HSC.

An apprenticeship in carpentry or furniture making (Riley)

I would hope to get, finish, get my HSC's done. Probably ...I hope to get into uni studying web design or any design that has to do with computers.

And probably get a job in the advertisement industry. (Oliver)

Oh, I am going to Southern Cross Vocational College next year. (Jack)

I hope I get average marks. Get into ... probably Bradfield TAFE next year. (Max)

I want to go to TAFE, motor mechanic and get an apprenticeship, a motor mechanic at a big dealership (William)

Further education was planned even by one or more former school refusers! This is a dramatic shift from the behaviours that brought these students to this special school. Within schools, a sense of belonging has been shown to be built upon student self-esteem and to predict school completion (Ma, 2003). In a sophisticated manner this is the employment of learner-centred principles (Meece, 2003) to develop the whole person. Meece's assumptions of learner-centred education and the key characteristics of learner-centred classrooms (Meece, 2003, pp.112-114) are implemented in the curriculum inside and outside the classroom.

In many ways, the experiences of the students ratify the findings of Wang et. al. (1993); Elliott et. al. (2001); Meece (2003); and Davis (2006), whose research were based in mainstream education. The motivational and instructional variables in this special school are the same as in mainstream schools: the only difference being the ways that these are inter-communicated between the students and staff. The context of these students, damaged by absenteeism, dysfunctional relationships at home and former schools, requires a different approach.

Discussion

The changes reported by the Berne students can best be understood within the context of the Berne School and Davis' (2006) discussion of school context as the theoretical framework for this article.

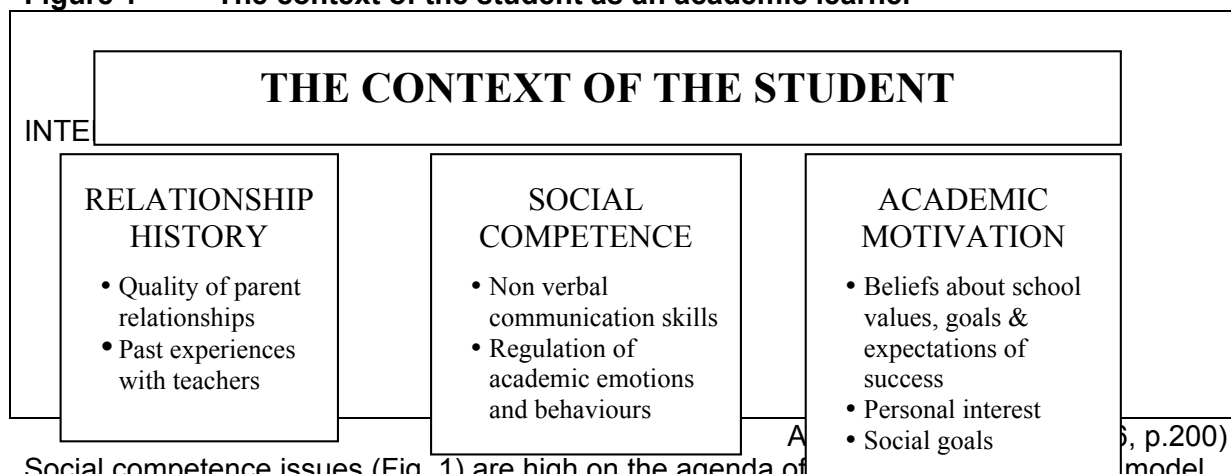
The John Berne School Context

The Berne School accepts those children who are some of the most marginalised. When these students arrive at Berne, they have a history of failure, and the relationships that have been damaged are frequently both family relationships and school relationships with teachers and with the educational process itself. Figure 1 shows that the history of relationships is an active force within each student's understanding of school.

By designing a different model of student-teacher relationship, Berne staff attempt to rebuild this aspect of a student's academic self concept. The design of a different student-teacher relationship includes a lack of school uniform, teachers on a first name basis, a deliberate policy of non reactivity and solving all problems before the day concludes and a student goes home. That students are encouraged to address staff by their first name is a deliberate policy to lower perceptions of structure and power relationships, which many Berne students have previously experienced negatively. The lack of school uniform is a policy decision for lack of power and school structure, as well as to minimise sources of friction, especially at the beginning of each day. For the same reason, no homework is usually requested as the lack of homework completion was a constant in these students' lives and a source of tension and strife each day with staff. Dispensing with these sources of conflict, school uniform and homework, offers these students the potential to start each day positively. The positive start to each day is commenced with breakfast, most frequently a shared event between staff and students.

Another part of the students' relationship history is that with their parents (Fig. 1). To help address this issue, Berne counselling and psychological staff offer a series of workshops for parents¹. These workshops are supported by a text written by Berne staff (Degeling & Langridge, 2010) to address the needs of the parents with whom they work.

Figure 1 The context of the student as an academic learner



Social competence issues (Fig. 1) are high on the agenda of a model in a deliberate and studied manner social skills, choosing when and how to modify behaviours of inappropriate language and action. Safety is always honoured, and staff mentors and counsellors are daily working with students to broaden their communication skills in functional ways. Similarly, direct intensive work in literacy and numeracy aims to give each student graduated successes starting from whatever low level they arrive. These programs are never called remedial, but diagnostic assessment determines competency levels which individual programs seek to develop. The Friday programs and the camps are structured processes to develop students' social and interpersonal competencies, both within their student group and with an increasingly wide cross section of society.

The third part of the Berne context is that of academic motivation (Fig. 1). The marginalised students (cf Jack, Lachlan and Cooper) have fractured beliefs about themselves, school and schooling success. Personal counselling sessions as part of the Berne experience, as well as structured social and socialising experiences of camps, excursions and work experience

¹ Cf <http://www.berneeducation.org/>

placements, all attempt to help a student rebuild their self worth. On the foundation of self-worth and increased personal goals beliefs about academic competence and expectations of success can be built.

These students are those whom the school system is failing. Through a combination of personal issues and histories, behaviours that have persistently been unacceptable in mainstream schooling, possibly lapses or inadequacies of pharmacological maintenance, parenting issues and individual poor choices, these students have all experienced at least the possibility of school exclusion and the consequent loss of educational opportunity. These students frequently present as angry, sullen and uncooperative, with little liking for school. Not all students succeed at John Berne School, but a large number do graduate at the end of Yr 10 with a NSW School Certificate and a renewed hope in themselves as valued young people. These successes are due in large part to the careful design and implementation of a school program that emphasises human values and builds students' self worth towards academic attainments in a graduated and monitored manner. The staff at John Berne School are professionally engaged in this program and committed to the individual growth of each student, despite the opposition of student's ingrained bad habits and low esteem. The perspective of the staff teaching at this school will be addressed in another article.

This school takes as its motto "Hope Always". The staff and the school context attempt to embody hope and to extend hope as a personal possibility for each student, despite their personal histories. It is also clear that these students hear that message and regain a sense of hope and purpose in their lives.

Conclusion

The beginnings of this small school thirteen years ago were humble. Today, the John Berne School shares its site with another educational activity, and still needs to juggle finances to balance its budget. Some supporters are active fund raisers for the school, and a significant part of the budget is contributed by fund raising activities. In recent years The John Berne School graduates around fifteen students each year. These students experience their lives their lives being turned around. Not only do most students achieve a NSW School Certificate, they graduate with a renewed sense of purpose, aiming for employment, apprenticeship or higher education through TAFE. Of the 2009 cohort, a few students returned to mainstream education to complete Yr 11 and 12 towards the HSC.

This small study of one special school suggests that the main issues of motivation and classroom engagement are equally present in this special school as they might be in mainstream schooling. Through creativity, hard work and a strong commitment to these marginalised students, staff have shown that hope can be communicated to such students. This hope is powerful enough to help students adjust their lives, develop new and more functional approaches to education and to also experience hope for themselves as individuals.

References

- Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2007). Response Ability. Retrieved 12th May, 2010, from http://www.responseability.org/client_images/778691.pdf
- Burgess, R. G. (1989). *The Ethics of Educational Research*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- Carter, P. L. (2006). Straddling Boundaries: Identity, Culture, and School. *Sociology of Education*, 79, 303-328.
- Davis, H. (2006). Exploring the Contexts of Relationship Quality between Middle School Students and Teachers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 193-223.
- Davis, H. A. (2006). Exploring the Contexts of Relationship Quality between Middle School Students and Teachers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 193-223.
- Degeling, J., & Langridge, C. (2010). *Parenting in Practice* (2nd ed.). Lewisham: The John Berne School.
- Dohan, D., & Sánchez-Jankowski, M. (1998). Using Computers to Analyze Ethnographic Field Data: Theoretical and Practical Considerations. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24(1), 477-498.

- Elliott, J. G., Hufton, N. R., Illushin, L., & Lauchlan, F. (2001). Motivation in the Junior Years: international perspectives on children's attitudes, expectations and behaviour and their relationship to educational achievement. *Oxford Review of Education*, 27(1), 37-67.
- Hill, M. (2006). Children's Voices on Ways of Having a Voice: Children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation. *Childhood, A Journal of Child Research*, 13, 69-89.
- Hufton, N. R., Elliott, J. G., & Illushin, L. (2002). Educational Motivation and Engagement: qualitative accounts from three countries. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(2), 265-289.
- Jackson, P. B., & Finney, M. (2002). Negative Life Events and Psychological Distress Among Young Adults. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 65(2), 186-201.
- Jones, M., & Stanley, G. (2008). Children's lost voices: ethical issues in relation to undertaking collaborative, practice-based projects involving schools and the wider community. *Educational Action Research*, 16(1), 31-41.
- Kearney, C. (2008). An Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism in Youth to Inform Professional Practice and Public Policy. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20, 257-282.
- Laenen, F. V. (2009). 'I don't trust you, you are going to tell', adolescents with emotional and behavioural disorders participating in qualitative research. *Child: care, health and development*, 35(3), 323-329.
- Livock, C. (2004). *Engaging At Risk Adolescents in Literacy Education at Alternative Education Sites in Queensland, Australia*. Paper presented at the 12th World Congress of Comparative Education Societies, Havana, Cuba.
- Livock, C. (2005). *Creative Pedagogies for At Risk Adolescents in Alternative Education Settings*. Paper presented at the Redesigning Pedagogy: Research, Policy, Practice, Singapore.
- Ma, X. (2003). Sense of Belonging to School: Can Schools Make a Difference? *Journal of Educational Research*, 96(6).
- Mark, M. M., Eyssell, K. M., & Campbell, B. (1999). The Ethics of Data Collection and Analysis. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 82, 4756.
- McGrath, H., & Noble, T. (2010). Supporting positive pupil relationships: Research to practice. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 27(1), 79-90.
- Meece, J. L. (2003). Applying Learner-Centered Principles to Middle School Education. *Theory into Practice*, 42(2), 109-116.
- NSW Department Education and Training. (2010). NSW Special Schools. Retrieved 17th May, 2010, from http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/gotoschool/types/specificpurposes/schoollist_ssp.php
- Penslar, R. L. (Ed.). (1995). *Research Ethics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- QSR International. (2009). NVivo (Version 8). Bundanoon: QSR International.
- Rowan, J. (2000). Research ethics. *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 5(2), 103-111.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Solomon, Y., & Rogers, C. (2001). Motivational Patterns in Disaffected School Students: insights from pupil referral unit clients. *British Educational Research Journal*, 27(3), 331-345.
- Stipek, D., & Miles, S. (2008). Effects of Aggression on Achievement: Does Conflict With the Teacher Make It worse? *Child Development*, 79(6), 1721-1735.
- The John Berne School. (2010). The John Berne School. Retrieved 15 April, 2010, from <http://www.berneeducation.org/>
- Townsend, D. (2010). Baby Centre. Retrieved 12th May, 2010, from <http://www.babycenter.com.au/pregnancy/naming/top-baby-names-2009>
- Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1993). Toward a Knowledge Base for School Learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 63(3), 249-294.
- Wolcott, H. F. (2005). *The Art of Fieldwork* (Second ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Paper code: 2069

Woods, P. (1996). *Researching The Art of Teaching Ethnography for Educational Use*. London: Routledge.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case Study Research. Design and Method* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.