Exclusionary School Discipline and Belonging

The most 'extreme' consequence that school's have at there disposal in response to inappropriate behaviour is the application of external suspension and exclusion. They are 'extreme' because by their very nature they exclude the young person from the group; they push them to the extremities of their learning community. As this is the consequence for high level and persistent inappropriate behaviour, then this implies that to *not belong* is the ultimate deterrent. Suspension can be a very necessary and powerful part of a larger strategic behavioural intervention for a young person but, as a community, we need to stop kidding ourselves that suspensions on their own create any positive outcomes for the young people who worry us the most.

With this at the forefront of our minds, the questions we need to ask ourselves as a learning community are; "What if the student excluded never belonged in the first place? Will suspension or exclusion be a deterrent for them?"

If we critically reflect on students who are regularly dealt with through exclusionary processes, we can identify a shared characteristic; that these students usually have little or no affiliation to the school, other people in the school, or the values of the institution. These students often feel little or no social connection to the school and experience feelings of social exclusion. The research of Baumiester and colleagues (2001, 2002, 2005), found that strong feelings of social inclusion are important for enabling individuals to regulate their own behaviour. These studies also proved that feelings of social exclusion and rejection reduce intelligent thought, increase aggressive behaviour and reduce pro social behaviour. If exclusionary discipline processes trigger feelings of social exclusion in young people then are these processes compounding the problem by reducing a young person's capacity for intelligent thought, peaceful conduct and pro-social behaviour? Is this like treating a burns victim with a red hot poker, thinking the intervention will make things better?

When individuals do not belong there is a sense of disempowerment and shame. In these instances, students create circumstances where they are empowered. Invariably these incidents are destructive and unacceptable, and to the detriment of themselves and others. These students, feeling rejected by the 'law abiding' members of the system, float to the fringes and form communities with others like them. These negative subcultures (as criminologists refer to them) become a big problem for their school through a range of anti-social behaviours, and are further stigmatized when schools label them as 'gangs'.

> Having failed in the status system of the school, the student has a status problem and is in the market for a solution. He solves it collectively with other students who have been similarly rejected by the school. The outcasts band together and set up their own status system with values which are the exact inverse of those of the school; contempt for property and authority instead of respect for property and authority, immediate impulse gratification instead of impulse control, apathy instead of ambition, toughness instead of control of aggression. The delinquent's behaviour is right by the standards of the subculture precisely because it is wrong by the standards of his school. By participating in the subculture the poor academic performer can enhance his self image

by rejecting his rejectors. The boy's status problem is solved by the collective creation of a new status system in which he is guaranteed of some success

(Braithwaite 1989:22)

The usual response to their behaviour; suspension or exclusion (sometimes appropriately so), pushes these groups of students further to the fringes (when all these students want is to belong; to be accepted, valued and empowered), and so goes the cycle with the student become more distant with every intervention.

How do we interrupt this cycle? We could try a different approach and connect with them, giving them someone to care about, or alternatively, we could do what we have always done, and get what we always got.

Many enlightened educators have realised that exclusionary practices alone make no positive change to student behaviour, but justify these processes by saying that it is all they can to do keep the school community safe. Recent research is now indicating that this too is an errant belief. Brenda Morrison states:

> ...schools now argue that suspensions are used to keep the school community safe, rather than shift behaviour. The evidence is now clear that they do not shift behaviour in a positive direction; however, these punitive measures may shift behaviour in the opposite direction, thereby increasing the risk to school communities. Schools, through capitalising on approaches that developed out of law and order concerns, have compounded the biggest mistake (misconception) of the justice and penal system – that punishment keeps communities safe. (2007:61)

Further questions to promote dialogue with your staff about this very contentious issue:

When is suspension appropriate? What is its purpose? How do we make suspension a procedure that enables success rather than disables, as is often the case? What are the implications when re-entering students, how do we reconnect them with the school community?

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