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Stand-downs, Suspensions and Exclusions: A Dilemma for Primary School Principals

**A Thesis Presented In Partial Fulfilment Of The Requirements For
The Degree Of Master Of Educational Administration**

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2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to recognise and sincerely thank the people who assisted in the preparation of this thesis:

- My supervisor, Professor Wayne Edwards, who provided supportive guidance, wise counsel, constructive criticism and continued encouragement throughout the research process. I am grateful for the invaluable advice he provided in structuring and editing the thesis.
- My second supervisor, Dr Jane Prochnow, whose initial research on this topic was the inspiration for this thesis and who provided detailed feedback and advice, later in the research process.
To both I owe a very special thanks.
- To friends and colleagues, I thank them for their interest and support. In particular, Mr Henry Wong and Mrs Pat Frykberg, who the author was privileged to have as her teachers as a pupil, and, now later in life, they have again provided encouragement and advice during this research process. I also would also like to acknowledge Mr Roger Wakefield for his professional discussion of ideas early in the research.
- To the 23 primary school principals whose enthusiastic response to the questionnaire made this study possible. Special thanks to the five principals who generously gave their time for the interviews and whose perceptive comments allowed me to share their experiences.
- Finally to my family, for their unconditional love and ongoing support, as typified by my daughters, Julia and Laura, who put a screensaver message on my computer which says “Keep going Mum, U can do it!!!” and my mother, Joan, who instilled a love of learning and always had faith in my ability to complete this thesis.

To all these people, I am indebted.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a selection of primary school principals managed and viewed the process of stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions. The researcher saw the need for such research because of the recent legislation that has changed the procedures for principals to follow, the growing public concern over the national statistics for disciplinary exclusions and the lack of research on disciplinary exclusions of primary age pupils or for principals' perspectives of the disciplinary exclusion process.

The research involved two main research methods (survey and case-study) which included a postal questionnaire distributed to all primary school principals in a localised area, a review of their Education Review Office Reports, structured interviews of five primary school principals and a review of their Behaviour Management Plans. These data were analysed with the aid of computer software packages: MICROSOFT EXCEL for the quantitative data and QSR NU*DIST for the qualitative data; and techniques of thematic induction and dilemma analysis were used.

The characteristics and behaviours of the primary age pupils receiving disciplinary exclusions in this study are an accentuated version of the trends of gender and ethnicity factors already identified for all New Zealand school pupils in the national database. This study also isolated other characteristics - the final year of school (either at primary or intermediate) and the transference of these pupils at-risk of disciplinary exclusions from school to school. Disciplinary exclusions can be attributed to many interacting complex factors related to individuals, families, schools and the direct impact of changing economic and educational government policies and legislation.

It was evident that principals worked hard at maintaining and providing an education for extremely difficult pupils but these pupils presented a dilemma for principals. On the one hand, principals' comments showed that caring principals and hardworking teaching staff went out of their way to support and educate these seriously misbehaving pupils in their schools, but, on the other hand, principals perceived that they had no other choice but to use the disciplinary exclusion process. The concept of 'dilemma' was developed further in this study with implications for principals' future practice and professional development and further research.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannise their teachers.

(Socrates, 469-399 B.C.)

If what Socrates had to say 22 centuries ago was true, then children have changed little through the years and there is nothing new about disruptive or violent behaviour at school. What has changed, however, is the way in which misbehaviour is defined and disciplined.

Disciplinary exclusions in the form of stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions are the ultimate disciplinary actions that school principals in New Zealand can take in response to pupil misbehaviour deemed to be seriously detrimental to the physical and emotional safety of pupils and staff and to the educational well-being of other pupils.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of disciplinary exclusions occurring in New Zealand schools. A reported 11,972 cases of stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions occurred in the first six months of the 2001 school year, of which primary and intermediate school pupils made up approximately 18% (Ministry of Education, 2001b). Of special concern has been the growing proportion of primary and intermediate pupils who are being stood-down, suspended and excluded at a young age, when educational needs are perhaps the greatest. These trends have attracted much media attention and public comment.

This concern has also been mirrored at parliamentary level by recent legislative changes and policy developments for the management of disruptive behaviour and the use of disciplinary exclusions. In New Zealand, the principal's authority to use disciplinary exclusions has recently been redefined in the Education Amendment (No.2) Act (1998).

1.1 Background to the study

It is important to understand the legislative context of the right of every child to an education and for the disciplinary sanctions of stand-down, suspension and exclusion. In New Zealand, the Education Act (1989) gives all pupils aged 5 to 19 years, the right to a free education. Schooling is compulsory for pupils aged from 6 to 16 years and there is a general obligation on the part of all Crown-funded schools in New Zealand to meet the learning needs of all young New Zealanders. Schools are required to ensure that all enrolled pupils are attending school. Parents have a legal obligation to ensure that their children are enrolled and regularly attending school.

The regulatory framework, which gives schools the right to stand-down, suspend, exclude or expel pupils for gross misconduct or continual disobedience, is the Education Amendment (No.2) Act (1998). The terms 'stand-down', 'suspension' and 'exclusion' are formally defined in this legislation. As disciplinary measures used in primary and intermediate schools, they mean the following:

- Stand-down is the formal removal of a pupil from school by the principal for a specified period. Stand-downs of a pupil can total no more than five school days in any term or 10 days in a school year. Following a stand-down, the pupil automatically returns to school.
- Suspension is the formal removal of a student from school by the principal, until the Board of Trustees decides the outcome at a suspension meeting. Following a suspension, the Board may decide to lift the suspension, with or without conditions, to extend the suspension or to exclude the pupil.
- Exclusion is the formal removal of a pupil under 16 years of age from the school by the Board of Trustees, with the requirement that the pupil enrol elsewhere. (The term expulsion now refers to pupils over the age of 16, as they do not have the requirement of being enrolled elsewhere.)

For the purpose of clarity, when referring to all three of the above types of disciplinary sanctions for primary and intermediate school pupils, the researcher has used the term 'disciplinary exclusions'. The researcher also uses the term 'primary schools' to include all primary school institutions as defined in the Ministry of Education's statistics; that is, contributing primary schools, full primary schools and intermediate schools.

In the ten years prior to the new Education Amendment (No. 2) Act (1998), there were significant reported increases in the number of pupils affected by disciplinary exclusions in New Zealand (Casey, 1993; Ministry of Education, 1996; Overton, 1995; Prochnow, 1998). There was criticism about the way in which principals had carried out disciplinary exclusions (Munro & Jeffery, 1987; Casey, 1993; Ludbrook, 1990). Indeed, an indefinite suspension was commonly referred to as the 'kiwi suspension' or the 'kiwi heave-ho', as parents were sometimes asked to voluntarily withdraw their child from the school.

The Education Amendment (No. 2) Act (1998) included amendments to the disciplinary exclusion legislation to make the process fairer, more flexible, and to decrease the number of pupils receiving disciplinary exclusions. The changes to the legislation provided a range of responses for cases of varying degrees of seriousness, ensured that individual cases were dealt with in accordance to the principles of natural justice and gave the Secretary of Education the power to make and publish procedural rules for principals and boards to follow. As a Ministry of Education spokesperson said at the time:

It is hoped that the new rules and procedures for school principals to follow in suspending students will see the trends reflected in this report reversed. The system gives schools greater flexibility to respond to cases, depending on how serious it is.

(Sturm, cited in Ministry of Education, 1999c, p. 1)

With the introduction of the new legislation, the Ministry of Education also set up a baseline database in July 1999 to monitor the number and trends of disciplinary exclusions. Therefore, with the definitions changing for suspension and expulsion, the introduction of the new categories of exclusion and stand-down and the establishment of a national database, statistical analysis of disciplinary exclusions, as they are now defined, has only been possible since 2000.

A recent Ministry of Education (2001b) report showed that 8565 pupils were stood-down and 2626 pupils were suspended in the first six months of 2001. The proportion of the primary and intermediate school stand-downs and suspensions to secondary school stand-downs and suspensions has increased. In the first half of 2000, 13% of stand-downs and 14% of suspensions occurred in primary and intermediate schools, compared with the same six month period of 2001, when 17% of stand-downs and 18% of suspensions occurred in primary and intermediate schools (Ministry of Education, 2001b). The time period, for which data have been collected in this national database, is too short to identify trends from these statistics but it will be important to see if the trend continues of an increasing proportion of disciplinary exclusions by primary school pupils.

This statistical information does not, however, inform us of how principals carry out the process of disciplinary exclusions within their schools. The researcher targeted the study at primary school principals because the new legislation for disciplinary exclusions placed more emphasis on the procedures that principals use in the disciplinary exclusion process and because of the growing proportion of disciplinary exclusions occurring at this age level.

The principal is faced with a basic dilemma in his or her decision to initiate the disciplinary exclusion process. On the one hand, the principal has the responsibility to ensure that the school is a safe physical and emotional environment for pupils and teachers, conducive to teaching and learning, but, on the other hand, the principal has the responsibility to ensure that every pupil (even the seriously misbehaving pupil) receives an education. It is a situation where the principal has to decide on the responsibilities of the school towards the individual pupil or to the 'common good'. Balancing these two basic responsibilities presents a dilemma to principals when

standing-down, suspending or excluding a pupil. The way in which primary school principals resolved this dilemma was the focus of this study.

1.2 Aim of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a selection of primary school principals managed and viewed the process of stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions of pupils in their schools.

The following research questions were formulated to achieve this aim:

1. What incidents resulted in the use of stand-downs, suspensions or exclusions, by local primary school principals? Associated research questions were:

- a. What kinds of pupils were being stood-down, suspended or excluded and did they have any common characteristics?
- b. Why were the pupils being stood-down, suspended or excluded?
- c. What were the events leading up to the stand-down, suspension or exclusion?

2. How did principals manage the stand-down, suspension or exclusion process?

Associated research questions were:

- a. What were the procedures used by the principal during this process?
- b. How were principals meeting these pupils' educational (and other) needs?
- c. What happened to these pupils after the stand-down, suspension or exclusion incident?
- d. How did the principal deal with everyone involved in the process?

3. How did principals view the stand-down, suspension or exclusion process?

The associated research question was:

- a. How did principals perceive the new legislation for the stand-down, suspension and exclusion process?

1.3 The researcher's interest

This study was a response to a perceived need for more research to be conducted into the general area of educational leadership and the legal framework in which New Zealand school principals operate. Of specific interest to the researcher were:

- The way in which principals integrated the dual roles of educational leadership and of management in their schools,
- The area of disciplinary exclusion, which lies at the interface of principals providing an education for every child in their school (educational leadership) and acting according to legal procedures (educational management),
- The recent introduction of the new legislation in New Zealand for disciplinary exclusion,
- The annual publication of statistics which show that disciplinary exclusion is an area of concern,
- The attention in the media to disciplinary exclusion statistics and to incidents of disciplinary exclusion which result in legal action and
- The call by principals for research into this issue (Denny, 1993; Prochnow, 1998).

1.4 Significance and justification for the study

Since the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools, there has been a growing concern about discipline in schools and the resources available to schools for the management of disruptive behaviour. This concern reached parliamentary level in the mid-1990s, when the Education and Science Select Committee conducted an inquiry into children in education at risk through truancy and behavioural problems, resulting in the Revell Report (New Zealand Parliament: Education and Science Committee, 1995).

However, there has been little recent research into disciplinary exclusions of school pupils in New Zealand. The few New Zealand studies that have been conducted either examined disciplinary exclusions at secondary school level or analysed

national statistics, legislation, judicial aspects and pupil or family perspectives (Casey, 1993; Galloway & Barrett, 1984; Ludbrook, 1990; Munro & Jeffery, 1987; Overton, 1995).

The only New Zealand study to focus on the principal's viewpoint of the disciplinary exclusion process at primary school level was conducted by a group of Massey University staff in 1997, reported in Prochnow (1998) and also in Fitchett (1999). This research documented and analysed the reflective narrative accounts of suspensions written by a group of local primary school principals across the central North Island of New Zealand. This study alluded to the dilemma that principals face when making the decision about a disciplinary exclusion, because:

Suspension from school is a severe disciplinary action which principals hesitate to take because of the impact on the child suspended. The child's education is disrupted in the present and the immediate future, and potentially for the duration of their school career. This is particularly true when the child is in primary school. For this reason the decision to suspend a child from primary school can be extremely trying and soul searching for the principal and the Board of Trustees.

(Prochnow, 1998, p. 13)

This Massey study was conducted prior to the introduction of the new legislation for disciplinary exclusions in 1998. The researcher intends to proceed beyond this study by investigating how primary school principals managed and viewed the process of disciplinary exclusions in their schools under the new legislation. Therefore, this study will contribute to the knowledge of this process.

1.5 Limitations identified in the study

It was recognised by the researcher that disciplinary exclusions were a sensitive issue for schools and that issues of individual privacy were also involved. While the response rate (74%) for postal questionnaires was considered to be good, no speculation was entered into about the 26% of schools not responding.

The study was based on primary schools in a provincial area of the North Island of New Zealand. The area was chosen because it was manageable, in scope and within access, by the researcher. For this reason, the researcher recognised that the study would not be representative of all New Zealand primary schools.

1.6 The structure of the study

Chapter One, the Introduction, has presented the focus of the study. The problem is stated as – How do primary school principals manage and view the process of stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions in their schools? Key research questions were identified. Reasons were given for the researcher selecting this topic and the need for such research – the recent legislation which has changed the procedures for principals to follow for disciplinary exclusions, the growing concern over the national statistics for stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions and the call for research on this topic by principals themselves. Finally, the limitations to the study were identified.

Chapter Two, the Literature Review, provides an overview of the theoretical debates on disciplinary exclusion, reviews the New Zealand and overseas statistics and empirical research and elaborates on the leadership dilemma that disciplinary exclusions create for principals.

Chapter Three, the Research Methodology, describes the research process. The research involved two main research methods (survey research and case-study research) and several research techniques with a triangulation strategy. There are four phases to the research process. In phase one, a postal questionnaire was distributed to all primary school principals in a localised area to identify which principals had used disciplinary exclusions and to make a preliminary foray into the topic. Phase two followed with a review of documentary evidence provided in the Education Review Office Reports of those schools identified in phase one as having used disciplinary exclusions. In phase three, case studies of five primary school principals were then undertaken, using structured interviews. Finally, in phase four, a review was made of documentary evidence provided in the Behaviour Management Plans of those five schools.

In Chapter Four, the results are presented and analysed. The data from each of the research techniques used - the questionnaire, the documentary evidence and the interviews - generated a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were inputted into a computer spreadsheet MICROSOFT EXCEL format. As the quantitative data were derived from a small group of schools, only simple frequency statistics were used. For the qualitative data, a computer program, called QSR NU*DIST, was used. The qualitative data were initially analysed for recurring themes and finally a 'Dilemma Analysis' was performed.

In Chapter Five, the Discussion, the dilemmas are used to structure the discussion of the findings.

Chapter Six, the Conclusions, reports the main conclusions, the implications for principals' practice and for future research, the limitations and contributions of this research and a clear set of recommendations based on this study.