
Systems, Structures, and Emerging Protocols for Problem Behaviour of Primary School Students in One Educational District

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This paper provides a perspective on one educational district's evolving "alternative education" strategy to support students with chronic problem behaviour. The Coopers Plains District serves 27,000 students supported by 1,700 teachers in schools of varying sizes and socioeconomic profiles. Provision of longer-term suspension of 6 to 20 days in line with education policy led district administration to (a) establish a permanent alternative education centre, at Acacia Ridge State School, to provide educational and behavioural programs for these students and (b) expand the visiting behaviour support service. A total of 14 staff was deployed in the centre (2.5 fulltime staff) and throughout the district (11.5 staff). School requests for support have ranged from minor issues usually managed by the class teacher to more complex issues that require team intervention in the school. Some students have received intensive withdrawal intervention at the centre. For the "behaviour teaching" team, the professional challenge has been focused on the need to understand the student as a learner and to understand why the problem behaviour happens. Team members have explored various interventions and have adjusted their skills through training and reflection. Team agreement to move towards a more positive approach to behavioural support has allowed staff with various skills and educational backgrounds to pursue a shared approach to working with students with an increasing diversity of challenging behaviour.

Problem behaviour in primary school

Western educational systems contain few skilled teachers to provide developmentally meaningful support for emotionally and behaviourally challenging students in the primary school. Moreover, teachers who work with these students in small groups have high attrition rates that flow from problems of training, politics, and face-to-face teaching demands. These teachers face the stress of educational politics surrounding services for students with high behavioural needs, difficulty engaging classroom colleagues in transition to re-inclusion, and the daily emotional and intellectual demands of working with these students. Of particular concern is the drain on teacher energy involved in the need to consistently examine one's own behaviours and emotions (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). These issues are acknowledged across western education.

Due to typical excessive behaviours demonstrated by students with E/BD, including noncompliance, aggression, and other antisocial behaviours, the inclusion process is often fraught with controversy and emotional upheaval for staff and students. E/BD students seem to have more inherent problems with the inclusion and mainstreaming process as compared to other categories of disability. Social skills are such a major deficit area for these students that they seem to have a difficult time simply getting along with peers and teachers (Jensen, 2004, p. 42).

Far from being deranged and dangerous, [most UK children with problem behaviour] were tired, despairing, underachieving, and invariably desperately sad about their circumstances....The same might be said about many of the staff who referred the pupils. They too expressed exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, and a sense of alienation from the demands of an increasingly utilitarian educational system (Barrow, 2002, p. 1).

School resources for problem behaviour in western education, have not only been very limited but also unsystematically used. Problem behaviour has a disproportionate influence on the positive learning environment and on positive teacher supports for appropriate behaviour and learning. In order to address this situation, recent models of effective services generally refer to a continuum of services and supports with fewer students attracting most services. Two well-known tripartite examples are the continuum of universal-selective-indicated intervention for developmental psychopathology, specifically externalising and internalising aspects of socioemotional developmental disorders (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001) and the continuum of effective behavioural assessment and support for no risk—at-risk—high risk students particularly for students with pervasive developmental disorders (Walker et al., 1996, later adapted by Crone & Horner, 2003). In both models, universal interventions to assure normal progress are effective for most students, but the aversive and destructive behaviour features of a residual percentage (5–15%) exceed the capacity of universal teaching strategies, and, thus, require more intensive intervention supports and services within and beyond the classroom.

These systematic models of intervention seek to provide support structures for all students. In a "Russian doll" metaphor, effective services to all students then permits more effective targeting of students at risk of progressive deterioration of behaviour, within the larger structural supports. In turn, more effective and coherent supports for most students across the school then permits highly intensive supports for high-risk students, to increase their chances of being maintained by a regular teacher in an inclusive setting (see Table 1). The extensive evidence-based literature on practice guidelines (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004; Jones, 2004) has thoroughly documented practices that integrate the best research evidence with practitioner expertise and person-centred values and has included recommendations for systematic levels of support for teaching and facilitating socially desirable behaviour.

Table 1

Continuum of Positive Behavioural Supports for primary students

TARGET BEHAVIOUR	CONTINUUM OF INTERVENTION	INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES
Students engaged in general acquisition of social skills and learning skills	<p><i>Primary prevention:</i></p> <p>Universal for all students across school or class</p> <p>80-85% of students progressing normally and displaying either normal or mild and trivial, if persistent, problem behaviours (e.g., chatting, arguing)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-wide management plans • Positive antecedent control and consequent control • Instruction in conflict resolution and anger management strategies • Effective teaching
Students at risk for life course persistent problem behaviour (e.g., behaviour patterns involving overt and covert externalising behaviour, antisocial intent to harm, and "everyday, impairing, and unmanageable" disordered conduct)	<p><i>Secondary prevention:</i></p> <p>Selective for small groups of students with aggressive, impulsive, and anxious behaviours within classroom</p> <p>5-15% students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult mentors (frequent monitoring) • Antecedent changes to scheduling • Direct instruction in social skills and moral reasoning • Support for anger management and self-control • Additional supports
Students with intense, life course persistent, and "chronic" problem behaviour (i.e., developmentally ongoing)	<p><i>Tertiary intervention</i></p> <p>Indicated for individual students 5% (1-7%) students</p> <p>Two sublevels:</p> <p>(a) 3-7% with behaviour serious enough to warrant functional behavioural assessment</p> <p>(b) 1-2% with behaviour dangerous enough to warrant functional analysis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual student services, agency hook-ups, and interagency collaboration • Wraparound services (family, community) • Alternative educational placement

Resources should be invested in prevention and early intervention across this continuum throughout the primary school years rather than in later attempts to manage more complex and destructive behaviour patterns. Students with risky sociodevelopmental behaviours such as defiance, impulsivity, and conduct problems have always been part of the regular school population (Forness, Walker, & Kavale, 2003). Moreover, they have all been subjected to punitive and coercive management of their problem behaviours (Sidman, 1999) because they have all disrupted classroom learning. Learning difficulties and behaviour difficulties continue to constitute the two major problems identified in primary and secondary schools in Australia (Andrews, Elkins, & Christie, 1993), the USA (Hinshaw, 1992), and the UK (Barrow, 2002). These problems in learning and behaviour, which also interact with each other (Hinshaw, 1992), have always been the responsibility of the regular school.

The continua models provide a conceptual framework to keep children struggling with emotional, behavioural, and learning problems on a competence-building developmental trajectory (i.e., to build normal academic and social competence and to foster some resilience to their developmental "child x context" adversities). The most basic developmental assumption is that nature is interdependent with nurture and that the child, therefore, develops in a context. "How is it that behaviour support so often seeks to remedy child-based difficulties, and so rarely involves substantial efforts to change the systems in which teachers and pupils work together" (Barrow, 2002, p. 2).

Framework for behaviour support in regular Queensland schools

Historically, students with problem behaviour—but without comorbid developmental disability—have not fit into state-ascertained categories attracting specialist resources. Unlike other states, there is no formal provision for socioemotional problem behaviours in the ascertainment guidelines in the Queensland state system (Conway, 2004). Such a category, however, is recognised within the state's Catholic education system. Conway's segmentation of problem behaviour into at least three categories (i.e., disability-related, mental health-related, and socialisation-related) reflects the empirical literature. Practices focused on disability and inclusion have set the frame for policy directions that seems to surround the needs of all students with problem behaviours. Moreover, policy documents have not provided the operational guidelines to address behavioural needs related to either sociodevelopmental psychopathology or to social disadvantage.

Continuing reluctance to tag and target "behaviour-specific" problems in the classroom, together with the lack of integration of various informing policies, leaves regular and specialist practitioners vulnerable to many stressors. There are wide gaps between policy idealism and practice realities and multiple policy documents in the developing policy environment. Factors that contribute to the policy environment include international legal mandates; historical and political considerations; professional expectations about duty of care; professional, legal, and criminal aspects of code of conduct for parents and teachers in loco parentis; and the temporary nature of specialist behaviour secondment.

Differential categorisation of problem behaviour for resource access must be expected to add to blurring of the epidemiological data on problem behaviour during the school years. Even within the disability area, global disability data within the state involve a complex array of calculations and categories. Approximately 14,000 students are ascertained at Levels 4-6 across a set of specified categories within Education Queensland's state-wide population of over 400,000 students. Less than half of those students are in special schools and special education units. The remainder are in inclusive settings, and some children enrolled in special schools may also attend regular schools. Children with disabilities who attend early childhood intervention programs frequently progress into primary regular education and, then, progressively, they return to specialised support programs up to the age of 21 (McRae, 1996). In addition to intellectual impairment, speech and language impairment, and hearing impairment, one category is currently described as ASD-Autism-Other Pervasive Developmental Disorder: Not Otherwise Specified (PDD: NOS). This subcategory of autistic spectrum disorder

might provide opportunities to resource some high-need children who do not meet the diagnostic criteria for autism but do have chronic problem behaviour. Hence, Queensland data on prevalence of PDD: NOS might be expected to show some skewing of incidence.

The architecture of educational policy for behaviour support has to deal with several issues. First, the systemic issues of problem behaviour during child development are about how each developing child is accommodated within the legislative educational context. Queensland educational policy addresses systemic issues of the nature, prevalence, and developmental course of problem behaviour in different ways. Schools have entered their end-of-term suspension and exclusion data into a state-wide database since 2003. Previously, the state's central office collected an end-of-term tally identified all the recognised categories. Trends either up or down in any categories could be identified at school, district, and the system level. The representativeness of these data and subsequent policy-driven response of the educational system are somewhat ill defined, although it appears that some educational districts have relatively higher levels of exclusionary practice and also appear to have higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and community problems of mental health.

Second, the structural issues are about how to include children who don't fit well into regular educational contexts and about what strands of behaviour support are available to various "kinds" of children with problem behaviour (Conway, 2004). Structural changes in educational policy have used exclusionary strategies to cope with problem behaviour and have resourced separate strands of behaviour support including alternative education centres. Over time, the state education system has instituted a number of strands of behaviour support. Typically, each strand pursued its own agenda without regard to other children needing behaviour support and other teacher training in behaviour support.

Third, the local issues concern the protocols needed to help children with serious problem behaviour to stay in the regular classroom and, if removed by suspension, to return to the classroom. These issues raise questions about how protocols for effective student management in alternative programs have developed different ways of responding to systemic and structural aspects of behaviour management and, specifically, about how such protocols for students removed from regular primary educational settings are emerging in one Queensland educational district.

Service structures and training strands to support problem behaviour in Queensland

Following the withdrawal of corporal punishment for severe behavioural infringements in 1993, rates of suspension and exclusion from primary school are thought to have risen dramatically. Issues of suspension and exclusion in the secondary school have become more noticeable with retention of more students through reduced opportunity for youth employment and increased school leaving age. The introduction of more comprehensive and stringent assessment and ascertainment processes, in conjunction with inclusion policy, has reduced the special school population of 10 years ago. It is likely, therefore, that some behaviourally disordered children previously managed with special school placements returned to the regular school.

Students with very high educational needs related directly to their problem behaviour continue to have no direct access to government-funded support. State policy has required school plans for behaviour management. This plan documents, for example, steps in assessment, procedures for intervention (e.g., least intrusive to most intrusive), and school disciplinary absences (e.g., suspension, exclusion, and cancellation). Schools have developed a whole school approach in their behaviour management plan as part of their responsibilities through the policy, SM-06 Managing Behaviour In a Supportive School Environment. Teachers have continued to provide most of the "behaviour management" support services for serious problem behaviour.

Prior to 1996, the Centre for Learning and Adjustment Difficulties (CLAD) and Tennyson Special School were the main providers of training and service related to behaviour issues. In particular, Tennyson Special School provided support for 300 students over 30 years, mostly at primary school level, mostly for nonascertained students, and for more students for shorter periods of time in recent years (Bouhours, Bryer, & Fleming, 2004). Guidance officers also used to provide specialist support to manage difficult and challenging behaviour of students outside ascertainment guidelines. However, competing demands on guidance services arising from development of a new range of policies focusing on disability issues has reduced their role in managing behaviour.

Education Queensland (EQ) also needed to provide some alternative services for students suspended from primary and secondary schools. On June 3, 1996, Queensland cabinet approved "enhanced Alternative Education Programs for students" (Department of Education, 1997, p. 5). In 1996, principals were able to give longer-term suspensions (6–20 days) on condition that they "coordinated arrangements for placing the student in an alternative education program that allows the student to continue with the student's education" (Education [General provisions] Amendment Act, 1996).

The most definitive decision to provide assistance for primary and secondary schools was the appointment of 300 behavioural specialists (state-wide). Although the term, "enhanced", signified the intention to deploy these behavioural specialists, the subsequent definition of these positions as 3-year secondments implicitly served to undermine individual motivation to develop and expand skills. These specialists were usually teachers (e.g., Advisory Visiting Teachers), who could be expected to return to the classroom at the end of secondment. Some districts employed psychologists, social workers, and public servants. State administrators provided some limited training for the new positions and allocated financial resources to support the district-based program, on an annual ongoing basis.

Exclusionary practices in the regular classroom

Because the main human resources in EQ are teachers, the paradigmatic approach to problem behaviour is as seen from the teacher's classroom perspective. Management of problem behaviour has always been viewed as a normal part of teacher duties. Hence, the teacher is inclined to view such a child as a problem for that classroom and to believe that external intervention is the means to "fix the child" so the child can "fit" into the system (Barrow, 2002; Beamish, Bryer, & Wilson, 2001; Howard, 2004).

This view does not consider how the educational system can be adapted to make a better match between the child and the classroom environment. Barrow (2002) distinguished between beliefs that either insulated or provoked UK teachers to focus on the child's unfitness for the existing classroom context. For example, provocative educational beliefs included students not wanting to work, students needing to change because classroom conditions could not be changed, teachers needing to win disciplinary interactions with students (rather than providing explicit instruction and practice in required behaviour), and teachers having to confront students about unacceptable behaviour (rather than defuse the situation and allowing the child to "save face").

Howard (2003) also found that teachers in southeastern Queensland regarded suspension as a last resort but accepted the need for this measure when they lacked resources and alternative strategies. Teachers cited the needs of the majority of students, their own needs to focus on their teaching rather than to manage behaviour, and the need to reject certain behaviours absolutely. The practice reality for the classroom teacher is intimately tied to the prevailing belief that some students and their behaviours do not fit existing classroom programming. Hence, intervention involves changing teacher beliefs, expectations, and values as well as changing children.

School-based supports for children presenting with behavioural profiles have been based upon a large menu of techniques. Teachers traditionally have employed a range of teacher models for behaviour management that include quality teachers (Glasser, 1990, 2000), facilitating teachers who teach problem solving using Responsible Thinking process (Ford, 2003), microskilled teachers (Richmond, 2002), assertive teachers (Canter & Canter, 1992), and decisive teachers (Roger, 2004). The value of these programs is their repertoires of teacher-student interactive strategies for the use of rules, skill training, and rewards in order to prevent escalation of minor problem behaviour.

However, when these approaches have been extended beyond the range of individual teacher efficacy, then they are often unintentionally reshaped as punitive and confrontational rather than instructive and preventative (Bryer, Beamish, Davies, Marshall, Wilson, & Caldwell, 2004; Sidman, 1999; Walker et al., 2004; Wehby, Symons, Canale, & Go, 1998). Teacher-student relationships can deteriorate quickly in the absence of (a) an integrated school model of behaviour support based on a continuum model, (b) ongoing collegial mentoring and supervision of effective practice with difficult students, and (c) in-school structures to process and respond to data on changing patterns of problem behaviour within classrooms and other areas of a school.

Historically, many teachers have been taught to assemble a classroom discipline plan and to validate it in terms of acceptability to an individual teacher (Charles, 2002) rather than in terms of its positive impact on child behaviour and observable outcomes for learning. Preservice training in behaviour management has tended to focus on personal preference for a discipline model, often linked to emotionally loaded criticism of very broad assumptions about a generic behavioural model (Edwards & Watts, 2004). Indeed, there are widespread notions that positive reinforcement is bad for children such that it manipulates children, creates praise junkies, steals their pleasure by taking credit for child accomplishment, refocuses their attention on rewards rather than the task, and reduces intrinsic achievement orientation (Strain & Joseph, 2004). Strain and Joseph criticised the

negative, evaluative language of such arguments, their misrepresentation of powerful evidence-based practice, and their nonvalidated alternative proposals as an attack on teachers' capacity to attract emotional and instrumental support for their actual practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that many teachers progress quickly from preventative strategies to corrective, socially exclusionary, academically competitive, coercive, and punitive practices (Edwards & Watts, 2004) that are aimed to reduce disruption within the classroom by removing a student who is actively troublesome.

Recent policy-to-practice initiatives in alternative programs

The 1996 provision for alternative programs was the method chosen to address an evident broadening of students with behavioural problems in regular school settings. The intention at that time was to augment existing regular classroom programs, but it quickly became apparent that some students needed more intensive support. In 1997, a further adaptation of this approach was to withdraw some students from the regular classroom for a short period of time. It was always envisaged, however, that these students would return to an inclusive setting in the mainstream environment. Thus, an important feature of this model for withdrawal was its use of partial and temporary removal to enable new skills to be taught, practiced, and generalised before returning to the regular classroom setting. In this model, an alternative educational pathway would help students already on an unsuccessful learning pathway to reassess and re-evaluate their learning goals, life choices, and future path.

With the policy change to remove corporal punishment and with changes to the Education (General Provisions) Act 1989 allowing longer suspensions, each district then proceeded to develop its own version of an alternative program to suit their own localised needs. Within the state guidelines, there have been some interdistrict variations in approach to problem behaviour and access to funding. Some districts did not provide a withdrawal program to accommodate the 6-20 day suspensions. Some districts wanted to make broader provision for students at educational risk as well as for those students on educational suspension. Some districts received additional funding and two extra 2 full-time educators (FTEs) during a state-wide trial of five alternative schools in 1998 to provide longer-term programs for students who were to be removed from their base school for a maximum period of 2 years. Since those trials ended, their extra resources remained with those districts rather than being redistributed (probably reflecting continuing needs within those districts). However, other districts needed to develop approaches to problem behaviour within their existing resources.

District-specific responses to state policy and to district behaviour issues

The Coopers Plains district reference committee expanded the focus of the alternative education program to develop a "district-wide" program for all students. Individual schools in the district had trialled small classes made up of students with behavioural difficulties but found that they did not have the localised teacher expertise to cope with these students in the longer term. Some formal procedures for suspension and exclusion were developed to document the severity of the problem behaviour and its inappropriateness in the regular school. The committee decided to set up a combined 6-

20 day suspension centre and a longer-term proactive program to assess and rehabilitate students at risk in the primary age group. Secondary schools in the district, however, chose to develop a separate strategy and withdrew funding support from the program to develop their own strategy for adolescent students. The Coopers Plains district offered alternative education programs to primary students with recommendations for 6–20 day suspensions and those who were seen to be able to benefit from a focused short-term intensive intervention.

The district committee established a "team leader" role in behaviour support in 1998 and reviewed it in 2002. In 2003, it was decided that the increased demands and complexity of the leadership role warranted a split into two separate roles: Coordinators of Behaviour Support Services and the Alternative Education Centre. This dual focused approach of centre-based and cluster-based support staff has continued into 2004. Under the line management of the Chair of the Reference Group supported by the Manager, Education Services, the district provided an outreach service, called the Behaviour Support Services team, and a withdrawal service, called the Alternative Education Centre. Team clusters of primary educators were formed to provide an Advisory Visiting Teacher (AVT) service for primary and special schools in the district. The district resourced its Alternative Education Centre (AEC) staff from its existing state allocation of 15 behaviour teaching staff for primary schools, with two FTEs taken "from the top" of the primary staff numbers for the district. Each aspect of this Behaviour Support Services team was coordinated separately. Both outreach and withdrawal teams were tasked to develop "key" teacher training, so that individual teachers could take a leadership role in problem behaviour within their schools.

Behaviour Support Services team members have worked with principals of primary schools and key teachers for behaviour to provide a range of service delivery options across the district. These strategies have included (a) working with schools to develop whole school policies and programs (e.g., antibullying program); (b) working with teachers in schools to develop plans to address the individual needs of students; (c) developing and teaching programs to at-risk students (e.g., various social skilling and group strategy focused programs); (d) parent training in the form of group and individualised versions of the behaviourally oriented Managing Young Children's Programs (MYCP), predominantly to address the needs of students who were already identified by their schools as being at risk; and (e) inservicing of staff on various topics about student management.

The Alternative Education Centre has developed a more focused approach to working with (a) the 6-20 day suspensions, (b) students at risk of multiple suspensions and exclusion, and, progressively in recent years, (c) students with high level challenging behaviour associated with ascertainties in the district. Centre staff also work with teachers in schools to (a) develop intensive plans for individual students with high needs, (b) design and teach programs to at-risk students, and (c) provide inservice teacher training on student management. Since 2002, AEC support to establish a teacher network for beginning and returning teachers ceased with changing district priorities.

Students referred to the AEC stay for several months (i.e., 3–6 months). Given this short length of time, staff face school expectations that students will be "fixed" when

returned to a regular classroom. The AEC team continues to work with schools to try to change this perception and to improve their transition planning. It must be noted that AEC programs face underlying contradictions in staffing: Behaviour specialists on teacher-equivalent salaries have more formal training in behaviour support. Current personnel have brought to the AEC a variety of additional training (multidisciplinary, social science, counselling, psychology, and behaviour management). Most of the team are experienced teachers, and there are a small number of paraprofessionals (including psychologists, social workers and teacher aides). However, the "short-term" conditions of AEC contracts lack long-term appeal. The temporary nature of their positions acts against further training and professional development to improve and consolidate practice. Although teachers who enter this field tend to be motivated, it is possible that they will be redirected into classroom teaching.

During the last 2 years, an increasingly diverse range of students being referred into the AEC has included children with disabilities. In particular, growth has occurred in the referral of students with ASD Level 6 who were not succeeding in Special Education Units in schools that have an inclusive policy. Since 1998, the identification of students with more complex profiles, specifically involving students with intellectual impairment concurrent with autistic spectrum disorder, has resulted in a gradual change in the district approach to problem behaviour. The adjustment has been incremental. As schools identified children with these challenging behaviour profiles, no clear management process was available for the district to respond to this identified need. Efforts to improve educational provision for students with disability and very high educational support needs were being discussed in 1996-1997. A teacher-training package, the Intensive Behaviour Intervention Support program (IBIS) based on the California-based Institute of Applied Behavior Analysis (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986; LaVigna & Willis, 1995), was developed by Education Queensland's Low Incidence Unit and later run by Disability Support Services Unit and the Staff College for Inclusive Education. LaVigna and Willis also ran intensive workshops in Queensland (1993, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2003). Griffith University's Wendi Beamish trained 400 Queensland teachers in positive behavioural support in the period 1993-2003 (Bryer, Beamish, Hawke, Kitching, & Wilson, 2003).

In 2001, therefore, five teachers from across the district were inducted through an IBIS Training Program at Disability Support Services Unit. It was expected that these teachers would have enhanced insights and skills to lead and facilitate more intensive intervention for all children with challenging behaviour. In 2003, with the arrival of another Manager, Education Services who had been part of the state-wide training in the LaVigna and Willis process offered at Griffith University in 1998, successive opportunities were created to develop a more intensive approach to individualised management plans. In 2003, a lighthouse project was trialled in the Browns Plains State High and Primary School feeder cluster as part of the development of the Coopers Plains District Learning and Development Framework. A modified IBIS training was offered to staff working with students with disabilities under the mentorship of the Principal Education Officer Student Services. A repeat of this program was offered to all relevant staff in every A-coded program (i.e., to every program approved by the Director General

to offer programs for students ascertained with educational needs arising from Autistic Spectrum Disorder) across the district. The district provided further opportunities for staff development through an international conference on educational practice that featured inclusive strategies (Anderson, 2003).

As this disability strand of problem behaviour began to be combined with the nondisability strands of problem behaviour in AEC referrals, the changing clientele has begun to affect AEC philosophy. In the AEC, student numbers have gradually increased over the years. Initially, students with disabilities were not accepted. Over time, however, the district increased the number of AEC teachers to assist in catering for some students with PDDs. Currently, the centre services about 30 students per year in the withdrawal mode. Hence, continuing professional efforts to refine and improve practice have been needed to meet evolving goals, changing conditions for practice, and changing expectations for service. After students have been referred to the AEC for intensive support, their behaviour and academic performance are more rigorously investigated. Through this process, a student's additional learning needs, whether arising from a disability, learning difficulty, or mental health disorder, become evident.

Emerging issues for the AEC staff team, and for the district and state educational systems, are consistent with the need for acquisition of more knowledge and training about problem behaviour that is widespread in the empirical literature. Team members need more training in the use of data collection tools and, also, in nonpunitive consequences. Although the AEC philosophy is positive, consequential management of students continues to use some punitive strategies that warrant ongoing amendment. Reporting and reintegration process back into schools needs to be improved. Strategies used in the AEC need to be disseminated into parent training. Schools need more training around early intervention, curriculum planning, and environmental adaptations to better support students with behavioural difficulties and, thereby, have to cope with fewer crises. Interagency networks are needed to better support the clientele and their families in wraparound intervention. The centre contemplates a camping program for students, the possible development of a second AEC in the district's southern cluster, and the possible expansion of services to meet the needs of high schoolers who have disengaged from regular schooling.

A mini-case study

A success story for the AEC is a student with a typically long and complex history. J is a 12-year-old boy, initially referred in Year 2. In a regular school, he could not stay after the midmorning session. His single mother was unable to keep him at home, and he often wandered the streets after dark. He came to school dirty with scruffy clothing, unbrushed hair, and often with nothing to eat during the day. Issues of neglect and lack of supervision at home had resulted in Department of Community (DOC) notifications. Attempts to work with his mother around parenting strategies proved unsuccessful.

In the AEC environment, J was unmanageable (e.g., absconding, violence, etc.). He was referred on to Tennyson Special School, and DOCS removed him from his home and relocated him in voluntary placement—hospital placement—24-hour care situation. Further testing indicated a communication difficulty with neurological difficulty in

following instructions. Psychometric testing indicated a low level of academic functioning but not low enough for ascertainment.

J returned to live with his parent at home with support for the parent. He also returned to the AEC, initially on a part-time placement. J ran away and burned himself with butane gas. When he was again removed from parent custody, his sibling was removed at the same time. Further intervention included training of placement house staff in AEC strategies, introduction of a trial of medication (dexamphetamine, later changed to longer acting Ritalin). After another 9 months, he was able to cope with full time schooling. Although he was starting to learn, he was still unable to cope with a large school environment. A paediatric diagnosis of PDD: NOS enabled pursuit of ascertainment for high school to provide extra support in high school. J is now considered to be "doing well."

Table 2

Pathway of a Year 7 student referred to Coopers Plains District's Alternative Education Centre

PHASES IN CENTRE	CENTRE PRACTICES IN ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION
Referral	Year 2; chronic course to Year 7
Clinical features	Fire-setting, truanting
Wraparound	Familial neglect; DOCs placement; trial at home; another DOCs placement
Rehabilitation	AEC support, assessment, training of placement staff and regular teachers
Diagnosis	Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Not Otherwise Specified)
Mainstream support	Transition into secondary school with support

Conclusion

The struggles of this alternative education centre, informally instituted to provide an economical and effective service within one district, reveal a continuing need for structural recognition of sociodevelopmental disorders in primary school students, for structural support for teachers of students with related problem behaviour in the regular classroom, and for district-wide capacity building in inclusive practices. The vision for this district-based AEC was to support not only students on suspension but also other troubled students. As the centre has become more established, however, it is coping with emerging needs to provide support for students with complex, challenging behaviour related to disability. It is clear that there is more need for special educational training in the intensive positive behaviour support process of assessment and intervention, which is already being recognised in some state inservicing and some preservice training of some special education teachers. The experience of this centre also makes it clear that there are many more students needing behavioural support, insufficient resources in the AEC to meet district needs, and more need for regular teacher training in school-wide and class-wide positive behavioural support (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002; Jackson & Panyan, 2002) and for state policy level alternatives to exclusionary practices and "zero tolerance" values.

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