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Exclusion of Primary School Students: Archival Analysis of School Records Over a 30-year Period

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Tennyson Special School

Tennyson Special School (TSS) is one option available to primary school students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, who have been excluded, suspended, or otherwise referred outside the regular school setting. This school has provided alternative placements for 301 students during its 1973–2003 history. Archival analysis of TSS records for the period from 1985 to 2003 identified paper-based files for 190 students. Analysis of demographic and school-related variables revealed ongoing changes in student population and pedagogy. Over time, the school shifted its focus from children with learning difficulties to boys with behavioural problems. Whereas 24-month stays were possible 10 years ago, the long-term program at TSS now deals mainly with 6- to 13-year-old children who exit within 6 months.

Context of this study

Childhood difficulties in behaviour and learning strongly predict adult dysfunctions. Longitudinal investigations of disrupted developmental pathways (e.g., Broidy et al., 2003) have identified multiple risks relating to child characteristics, family function, and school operations. The value of early intervention has featured as an increasingly common conclusion of many different studies (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001). Yet most children at risk in western educational systems either do not attract extra support from family and school services or attract such support only when their problems become very troublesome to schools and wider communities.

Public education has a long history of exclusionary practices relating to intellectual and learning disabilities (Mackintosh, 1998) and a longstanding preoccupation with discipline (Jackson & Panyan, 2002). The typical educational response to students with various chronic and acute discipline problems has been "suspension or expulsion, placement in special education, or placement in some other alternative program" (Jackson & Panyan, 2002, p. 9). System data on suspension and exclusion from regular schools, however, has been poorly reported in the literature. Across all jurisdictions, secondary schools have accounted for about 80% of suspensions and exclusions (e.g., Hayden 2002). For every 1,000 students in the 1994 school year in South Australia and

NSW, there were 28.8 short suspensions, 4.4 long suspensions, and 0.3 exclusions (Taylor, 1995). For every 1,000 students in the 2000–2001 English school year, there were 1.2 permanent exclusions and 20 suspensions (Hayden, 2002). Rates of suspension and exclusion in Queensland, based on 1997–98 student disciplinary data from primary and secondary schools, appear to be comparable, if not higher, with that in wider western society (Brian Higgins, personal communication, June 22, 2003).

The few studies of exclusion and alternative placement in primary schools have been British (Gersch & Nolan, 1994; Hayden, 1997; Hayden & Ward, 1996; Parsons, Benns, Hailes, & Howlett, 1994; Marks, 1995). Most recent research on the demographics of exclusion has been British work and has typically involved a focus on secondary schools, an overrepresentation of boys, and a concern about physical aggression (Hallam & Castle, 2001; Hayden, 2002; Parsons & Castle, 1998; Slec, 1992; Taylor, 1995; Townsend, 2000). Principals, teachers, parents, and staff from outside agencies have been interviewed (Edwards, 1996; Marks, 1995; Normington & Kyriacou, 1994; Partington, 2001; Solomon & Rogers, 2001). Efforts in some studies to examine school file data have typically involved small samples of a few boys (Edwards, 1996; Garner, 1996; Gersch & Nolan, 1994; Laslett, 1982; Parsons et al., 1994; Solomon & Rogers, 2001). An exception was a British analysis of case files for 265 excluded primary-age children (Hayden, Sheppard, & Ward, 1996).

Within this relatively sparse literature, one research theme has involved efforts to capture the "voice" of the excluded student. Apart from Hayden (1997) and Parsons et al. (1994), these efforts have been focused on the secondary level, both in the UK (Garner, 1994; Pomeroy, 1999) and in Australia (Edwards, 1996; Partington, 2001; Taylor, 1995). The scale of these studies has also been small. For example, Partington (2001) interviewed 15 suspended students, their parents, and teachers in two low socioeconomic (SES) state high schools to examine the deterrent value of suspension. The results of these studies have highlighted the emotional dissatisfaction felt by adolescents with their alternative placements, their expressions of anger and feelings of neglect and unfairness, and their despondency at multiple suspensions. There was an overall sense that suspension and exclusion did not transform or deter their previous behaviour.

There has been even less research on student views of alternative provisions. Garner (1996) reported feelings of despondency and fear of labelling shared by both teachers and secondary students in pupil referral units. Solomon and Rogers (2001) concluded from students' stories that regular classrooms are the most appropriate setting in which to improve low self-efficacy in specific curriculum areas, a topic raised in the stories. However, findings about alternative schooling have been less uniform (i.e., less negative) than students' stories about being excluded. Retrospective studies of students' experience in alternative settings have also highlighted some positive features. Students in a UK special school for primary and secondary students (Laslett, 1982) and in a Finnish special school for "maladjusted" children in long-term placements (Jahnukainen, 2001) mentioned labelling as a concern. However, these students also revealed positive feelings for their relationship with the special teacher and for experiences in a small teaching group.

Child, Youth, and Family (CYF) social workers in a New Zealand town used archival analysis to review family services for young clients with behavioural problems (Webb, 1999, 2003). In this study of computerised and complete case records of 306 clients in the period 1990–1994, particular attention was paid to what could be learned about referrals and repeat referrals. First referrals were made earlier for the severe behaviour categories (severe antisocial behaviour with or without recidivist offending patterns, or criminal recidivism only). Child abuse, family violence, and multiple family problems were also associated with these categories. An intervention process (family assessment, problem identification, action plan, follow-up) overall reduced the subsequent number of referrals. Given the extremely high costs of maintaining long-term residential placements for ongoing juvenile offenders, Webb (1999, 2003) recommended early intervention before severe antisocial behaviour became chronic.

A retrospective study of archives at an alternative special school provided an opportunity to follow-up how effectively alternative placement has met this kind of recommendation for early intervention (Webb, 1999, 2003). Because this school targets students removed from regular schools, archival analysis was aimed to investigate the nature and outcomes of educational early intervention for children at risk of chronic antisocial behaviour and ongoing social exclusion. This school has offered alternative programs since 1973 to primary school students as young as 6-years-old who had been excluded from mainstream schools due to severe behavioural problems. Placement at Tennyson Special School (TSS) was an intervention in itself, in that it provided remedial alternative programming for students at risk.

School records have preserved many aspects of each child's journey through the school years into adulthood. The TSS principal was interested to review this school history. With her support and participation, this investigation became possible. The first author aimed to organise, code, and explore Tennyson's archival data on the social and educational context prior to, during, and for a brief period subsequent to exit from Tennyson. He was interested to track different student pathways into and through the school and, subsequently, to investigate the relationship of school programs to longer term student involvement with family and police services (see Figure 1).

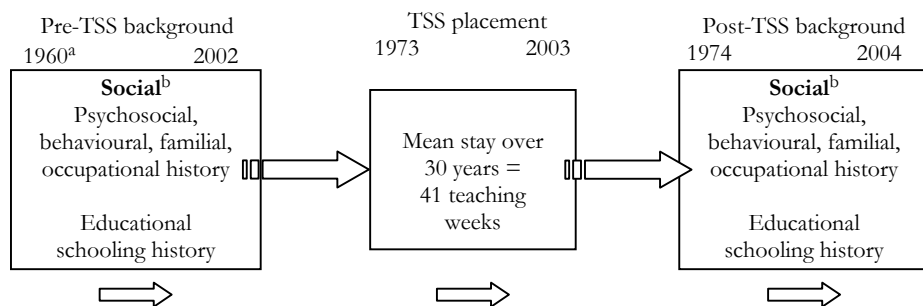


Figure 1.

Bouhours' doctoral project, 2002–2005, on socioeducational pathways through TSS.

^aThe oldest TSS former student was born in 1960.

^bIncluding any involvement with welfare, health, & criminal justice agencies.

This archive afforded an opportunity to survey those who attended this school and their pathways through this alternative placement. That is, analysis of school records considered (a) how students were referred to TSS and whether they were selected (supplementary records indicating that some referrals did not proceed to placement), (b) what happened to them at the school (e.g., length of stay), and, to some extent, (c) what were their subsequent histories (i.e., return to the reintegrating school). This survey of the school's records also provided historical insight into evolving policy and practices (see Figure 2). For example, issues of interest were changes over time in (a) criteria for selection of clients, (b) approaches to pedagogy and intervention, and (c) influence of policy and personality on practice. Perusal of school documents in the archive and ongoing interviews with previous principals have supported this aspect of the investigation.

The school history

This small school has operated in the Brisbane suburb of Corinda for 70 years. A regular school operated from 1934 to 1973; since then, a special school (TSS) has catered for some 300 children. Throughout the school's history, the threat of closure has been a recurrent theme. The original one-teacher building was used as the classroom till 1977, when the first of two demountables was supplied. When the school received further renovation in 1994, it then comprised three separate classrooms. At that time, it was decided to combine students into two multiage classes, with a consequent reduction of teachers from three to two. Since 1980, more than 90% of students have been boys. A class of 10 students has been preferred over a smaller class size, in order to better reflect the dynamics of regular classrooms. There is a regular turnover of students in the classroom; as some go back to mainstream, new students are accepted.

Origins as a regular primary school: 1934–1973

The school was established as a rural school in an area of farms and creeks along the Brisbane River. The area became an industrial zone in the 1940s and 50s, with a flour-mill continuing to operate to the present. When the children of families resident in the area grew up, student numbers declined to a nonviable level. Although the school was expected to close in 1972, community pressure resulted in an active search for another use for the school.

Early years as a special school: 1973–1982

A range of factors may have contributed to the decision to establish a special school on the site. Because the area was isolated within an urban setting, access was reasonable, but absconding was unlikely to be successful. Because children with persistent learning difficulties were attracting public interest at the time (SPELD, 2003), they comprised many initial student placements. Because the state health department recognised that the educational needs of youth with psychiatric problems were not being met, an interagency health-education initiative resulted in some adolescent placements at TSS. In 1983, the establishment of the Barrett Adolescent Centre may have reduced the number of adolescent placements.

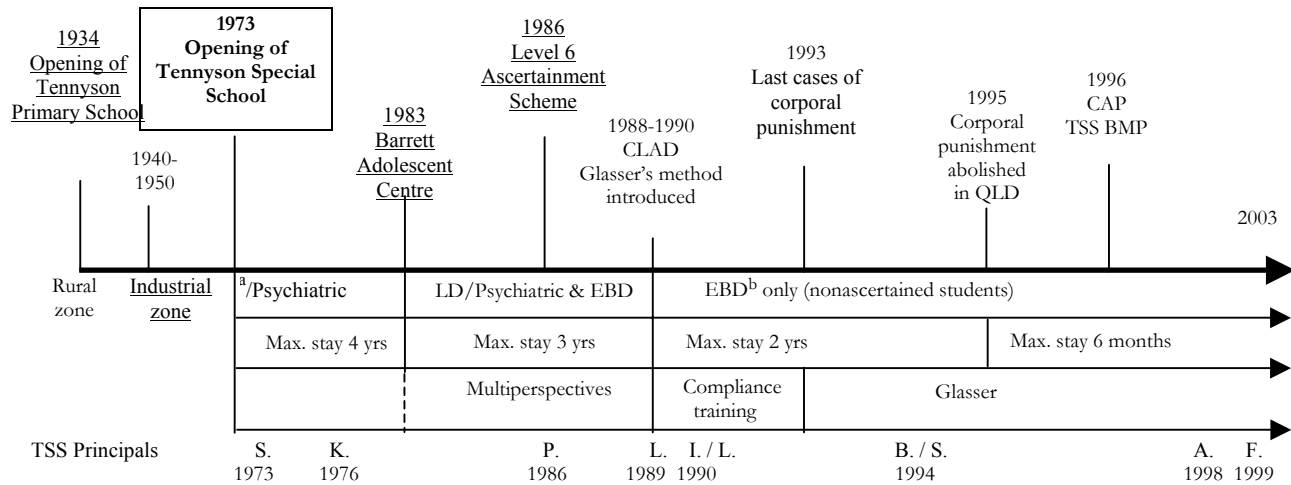


Figure 2.

Historical time line for Tennyson Special School, its students, their length of placement, their pedagogy, and their principals.

^aLD = Learning Difficulties. ^bEBD = Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties.

The farming environment encouraged the use of TSS as a "long stay" placement for up to 4 years. In this "social alternative" school, students also enjoyed opportunities for farm activities (until 1984) and recreational activities such as photography and go-karting. In 1977, an inspector's report praised the rich curriculum, which provided access to programs at several other schools (e.g., home economics, manual arts, integration).

Middle period as a special school: 1983–1992

During the 1980s, TSS was exposed to external influences from systemic changes in the state education department. For example, there was the introduction of behaviour modification through the Centre for Learning and Adjustment Difficulties and modifications related to ascertainment procedures. Internal influences ranged from changes in the client profile to changes in the philosophy of teachers working with these clients. In the mid-1980s, teachers were working from various personal and sometimes conflicting perspectives with an overall focus on external teacher control of the child's behaviour. Towards the early 1990s, teachers were working within a Glasser (1986, 1990) framework with an overall focus on the child's internal control of behaviour.

In the 1980s, statewide consistency of practice for students with learning and behavioural problems became an issue. Some teachers with a psychological perspective used behavioural modification. Teachers with a social work emphasis used relaxation. Some teachers used an "opportunity school" approach. In 1990, the Centre for Learning and Adjustment Difficulties (CLAD) at Dutton Park, headed by John Holbeck, introduced a behavioural approach throughout the state. This facility offered a withdrawal program, provided teacher training, disseminated proactive programs (e.g., social skills training and anger management), and established systems of referral and data recording. For example, a 6-month course in tracking behaviour enabled some TSS staff to collect behavioural data sets, thereby contributing to student file volume.

After 1986, it was decided to accept into TSS only those students who were nonascertained (i.e., behavioural referrals involving no other major developmental and intellectual problems). For students with pervasive developmental disabilities and high support needs, the state education department established an Intellectual Impairment Level 6 ascertainment scheme. The privately run Endeavour Foundation worked with moderately to severely impaired children until 1986, when it merged with the state system. The criterion for TSS placement became primarily behavioural.

In 1989, several changes affected the school. First, a report by the principal to the executive director dated June 16, 1993 cited a trend towards increasing referrals for oppositional and aggressive behaviour. Second, the school's referral procedures showed that the school also responded by refining its selection criteria to include students with "severe categories of behaviour" such as conduct problems, school phobia, and personality and adjustment issues such as shyness, social ineptitude, and social interactional problems (e.g., significant difficulties during play with other children). Third, professional development in the period 1988–1990 for regular classroom teachers included very popular workshops with American psychiatrist William Glasser (1965, 1986, 1990, 2000) on "control theory" (viz., making students responsible for their own actions) and "reality therapy" (i.e., consequence control). The principal of the day

imported Glasser's mainstream combination of counselling, environmental control, and academic focus into TSS as a way to establish some practice cohesion among staff.

Current period: 1993–2003

By 1993, the last record of corporal punishment was entered into the files. This year brought important changes to the school. The principal and parents successfully lobbied the education minister for a time-out room, in order to ensure there were appropriate facilities for controlling extreme behavioural episodes. In 1993, the principal advised the parents that the Department of Education Manual policy of time-out and restraint restricted use of the time-out room to the management of dangerous situations and that, therefore, this policy terminated the 1989–1993 emphasis on compliance training and behaviour modification to teach specific classroom and social skills.

Whereas, in the early 1990s, staff placed emphasis on remediation and repair of deficits in behaviour that interfered with ability to fit into the regular classroom (viz., to comply with behavioural instructions to "sit" and "listen"), they later placed more emphasis on schooling as a means to help children meet their needs in socially appropriate ways within the school context. Changing beliefs among the staff also fostered interest in building students' confidence as learners by providing regular curricular experiences in literacy and numeracy.

In the period 1996–98, the state government introduced many policies on behaviour management. In June 3, 1996, Queensland Cabinet approved "enhanced Alternative Education Programs for students" (Department of Education, 1997, p. 5). Extra support staff appointments were funded. Principals were able to extend suspension and exclusion of students but were required to "coordinate 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). Schools operations statements supplied by Education Queensland required review of behaviour management plans and practices in 1998 and review of these plans in relation to bullying in 1999.

However, the introduction of successive departmental policies on behaviour management, the creation of alternative education programs, and the extension of principals' discretion in matters of student disciplinary absences, may have fueled exclusionary processes by maintaining a focus on behavioural rather than educational perspectives of school discipline and by designing procedures and opening facilities where more student could be sent more often. Within the larger educational system, there was a staff perception that behaviour management exceeded regular school resources: Many of these students with challenging behaviour were ineligible for resource support because they did not fit into ascertainment categories. Within TSS, however, there was a staff perception that educational support would enable referred students to return successfully to their referring schools and to function appropriately in the natural environment provided in regular schools. Inspection of the school records at TSS reveals tensions between evolving school aims and emerging system pressures. Thus, the TSS archive can be used to examine, in microcosm, historical trends in exclusionary practices related to behaviour.

The school archive

An archive is a memory of a system. The long-term memory of this school for the period 1973–2003 was stored in a "dark, narrow, dusty, and messy" room. Basic details about students were entered into two A3 registry books (1973–1996; 1996–2003). The first entry (Identification Number 1), written in an elegant calligraphy, was made on March 20, 1973. The latest entry at the time of this study was made on July 21, 2003. Additional documentation for long-term programs and other records was filed in numbered boxes.

File information about students at TSS included date of admission to TSS, given names and surname of the student, date of birth, grade, TSS exit date, and name of reintegrating (receiving) school. Other data included names and surnames of parents or carers, their address and telephone number, their occupation, and, until the mid-1990s, their religious denomination. Other aspects of the record included a guardian file. An isolated caning incident in 1993, for example, required the guardian's agreement to corporal punishment: Earlier records of caning did not require this agreement. Documentation relating to consent regarding procedures such as corporal punishment, physical restraint, and time-out changed over time, appearing around 1989 and progressively acquiring more specific features.

Therefore, records were kept fairly consistently across periods of change in pedagogy, staffing, and student population. The kind of entries underwent some changes, and behavioural data swelled the size of files in later years. As the criteria for student placement shifted from learning to behaviour, the earlier approach (*viz.*, flexibility in approaching each case and relatively little monitoring of progress) shifted to less flexibility and more intensive classification and monitoring.

Cleaning archive, organising files, and coding data

The task of "refreshing and retrieving the memory" was substantial. Extensive materials of various kinds (stationery, equipment, memorabilia, administrative records, policy records, etc.) needed to be sorted and separated from the primary archival records on students. Three months of intermittent work (June–August, 2003) was required to bring order to the files stored in boxes on shelves and in filing cabinets. Over time, the integrity of the storage system deteriorated, affecting the location of boxes in the series and the condition of student files within a box (missing, duplicated, and out-of-sequence papers in the file). Moreover, this activity revealed that the oldest box started with File 93, entered March 25, 1985. It was discovered that student records from 1973–84, which were sent to government archives, had recently been destroyed.

By the end of August, boxes containing student files relating to long-term programs were reorganised and relocated to the right side of the room. Staff could also access specific current files easily to extract or deposit information. File reconstruction was then undertaken, in which the materials within each file were ordered, duplications removed, and documents reasonably sequenced in time. It was then possible to begin to make decisions about the selection of variables for data coding.

Variables identified for initial coding included structural variables such as demographic information (age, gender, SES indicators) and process variables (*e.g.*, medical and diagnostic records; educational and behavioural records; written student

work and comments). Some variables comprised specific, single indicators (e.g., family status as intact, single-parent, or reconstructed; specific time of exit). Some variables comprised clusters of data such as "psychosocial profile", which included a complex array of information. The type, sector, and SES of reintegrating (receiving) schools that accepted the student after their TSS placements were documented. Although data on size and SES of referring (sending) schools are only available for the period 1993–2003, it was also considered.

In order to provide an initial overview of the archive, the present study reports frequency and percentage data on eight variables of demographic, family context and school-related information. The data are organised into three eras (viz., each approximating a decade). Table 1 presents summary trends in these data.

Girls comprised a quarter of the enrolments for the first period (viz., LD) but were extremely underrepresented thereafter. Age at entry remained stable. Over 70% of the families in the 1993–2003 period were not intact families. Length of stay decreased over time. The reintegrating school in the 1993–2003 decade is usually a regular state school.

These data are pertinent to the match between Education Queensland policies in the last decade, ensuing school practices, and TSS student outcomes. According to the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (School of Education, University of Queensland, 2001), schools that have the characteristics of TSS feeder schools during the last decade (i.e., large, disadvantaged) were particularly deficient in providing "productive pedagogies" such as intellectual quality, connectedness, and recognition of group differences. Issues of educational equity and of control and educational streaming of lower class kids are then relevant to inspection of this archive. It can be argued that financial and cultural investment in such regular schools is not addressed by enlarging the range of opportunities to increase the volume and rate of turnover of students who can be "mass-processed" through exclusionary programs.

Referring schools

Data about referring and receiving schools was considered to be an important historical indicator of school function (see Table 1). Therefore, school size and SES of school's suburb were also coded. Referrals during the last decade have come from about 60 schools in the surrounding districts, region, and city area (mostly state schools but also some private schools). The 2001 enrolment figures for Education Queensland were used to calculate approximate size of these schools. A disproportionate number of these referring (sending) schools have been large primary schools situated in disadvantaged areas. Since 1994, reintegration plans have been systematically negotiated at the time of referral between the feeder school and TSS. Thus, most students since 1994 have returned to the same school.

Conclusion

This report on this archival analysis provides a snapshot of some changes at TSS. School referrals to TSS in the last decade have featured children from lower SES backgrounds from larger primary schools. As shown in Table 1, changes in TSS in the last decade can be viewed as a metaphor for changes in behavioural management. The last decade has

accounted for half of the TSS records, and shorter stays at TSS has also allowed processing of more clients. Government policy has started to encourage a more continuous array of support options ranging from behaviour management support teachers in regular schools; to short-term alternative programs for primary, secondary, and ascertained students, involving short 2-week withdrawals into the Centre for Alternative Programs; to five alternative schools, which are currently being trialled. These options are additional to a relatively longer placement at Tennyson Special School. Inclusionary effectiveness may require more than a richer repertoire of exclusionary practices. Everyday classroom practices in preventive intervention, especially in the early primary years, may also need systematic review and policy support for proactive training and capacity building in positive behaviour support (Jackson & Panyan, 2002).

These data also suggested that there have been external and internal influences on practice at TSS. First, there were indications that systemic policy forced some changes (e.g., selection criteria, ascertainment, and the shift from learning to behaviour referral; behaviour management, consent, and alternative programs). Second, there were indications that individual beliefs of principals and staff fostered some changes in pedagogical approach in the last decade (e.g., compliance training of specific behaviours, therapeutic interventions involving artistic self-expression, and quality schooling with a focus on curriculum-based programming).

This investigation will proceed to examine the more complex data recorded in student files and to consider other material on the school history. For example, there are registers of corporal punishment from 1981 to 1993 and a book of "rewards and punishments" from 1989 to 1993 (viz., era of compliance training), which did not record any rewards. For the 1990s, there are files of "rejected referrals" that were not accepted at TSS or that did not follow-up the referral.

Table 1

Changes in various structural variables at TSS across three decades

TOTAL N = 301		1973–1982 N = 57	1983–1992 N = 98	1993–2003 N = 146
Gender	Male	43 (75%)	90 (92%)	142 (97%)
	Female	14 (25%)	8 (8%)	4 (3%)
Age at entry (in years)	Range	5.3–13	6–13.5	6–13.5
	Mean	9.6	9.8	9.6
	Median	9.6	10.3	9.6
Families	Intact		12 (12%)	18 (12%)
	Intact with problems		9 (9%)	23 (16%)
	Single parent/step	Not available	27 (28%)	80 (55%)
	Foster/state		9 (9%)	25 (17%)
	Unknown		41 (42%)	0
SES student's home area*	Low (<25 th percentile)	18 (32%)	38 (39%)	64 (44%)
	Medium (26–75 th percentile)	23 (40%)	37 (38%)	56 (38%)

TOTAL N = 301		1973–1982 N = 57	1983–1992 N = 98	1993–2003 N = 146
	High (> 75 th percentile)	16 (28%)	23 (23%)	26 (18%)
Length of stay (in teaching weeks)	Mean	79	45	23
	Median	70	40	21
	Range	10–196	4–141	3–92
Type of reintegrating school	Mainstream	39 (68%)	68 (69%)	127 (87%)
	Special	15 (26%)	19 (19%)	9 (6%)
	Correspondence	2 (4%)	1 (3%)	1 (1%)
	Unknown	1 (2%)	9 (9%)	9 (6%)
Sector of reintegrating school	State	47 (82%)	74 (77%)	133 (90%)
	Private	7 (12%)	13 (13%)	2 (2%)
	Correspondence	2 (4%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
	Unknown	1 (2%)	9 (9%)	10 (7%)
SES of reintegrating school ^a	Low (<25 th percentile)	12 (21%)	27 (28%)	57 (39%)
	Medium (26–75 th percentile)	28 (49%)	47 (48%)	46 (32%)
	High (> 75 th percentile)	16 (28%)	12 (12%)	34 (23%)
	Unknown	1 (2%)	12 (12%)	9 (6%)
Sector of reintegrating school	State	47 (82%)	74 (77%)	133 (90%)
	Private	7 (12%)	13 (13%)	2 (2%)
	Correspondence	2 (4%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
	Unknown	1 (2%)	9 (9%)	10 (7%)
SES of feeding school (N = 55)	Low (<25 th percentile)	NA	NA	21 (38%)
	Medium (26–75 th percentile)	NA	NA	18 (33%)
	High (> 75 th percentile)	NA	NA	16 (29%)
Size of feeding schools (N = 55)	Small (< 185 students)	NA	NA	6 (11%)
	Medium (186–428 students)	NA	NA	19 (35%)
	Large (> 429 students)	NA	NA	30 (54%)

^aCalculated using the ABS Socio Economic Indices For Areas (SEIFA). The ABS Index of Disadvantage is based on the 1996 Census, and has, therefore, greater validity for the period 1994–98. We assume here that little change has happened in the relative SES of the Brisbane local areas between 1973 and 2003. Note, however, that, if some change did occur, it would be toward gentrification of former low SES areas.

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