Caught between a rock and a hard place: Disruptive boys' views on mainstream and special schools in New South Wales, Australia

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Abstract

Students with disruptive behaviour in the Australian state of New South Wales are increasingly being educated in separate "behaviour" schools. There is however surprisingly little research on how students view these settings, or indeed the mainstream schools from which they were excluded. To better understand excluded students' current and past educational experiences, we interviewed 33 boys, aged between 9 and 16 years of age, who were enrolled in separate special schools for students with disruptive behaviour. Analyses reveal that the majority of participants began disliking school in the early years due to difficulties with school work and teacher conflict. Interestingly, while most indicated that they preferred the behaviour school, more than half still wanted to return to their old school. It is therefore clear that separate special educational settings are not a solution to disruptive behaviour in mainstream schools. Whilst these settings do fulfil a function for some students, the preferences of the majority of boys suggest that "mainstream" school reform is of first order importance.

Keywords: school exclusion, alternative settings, disruptive behaviour, mainstream and special education.

Since the mid-1990s, the use of separate special educational settings has rapidly increased in

Australia's largest school system, the New South Wales (NSW) state government school

sector (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997; Graham & Sweller, 2011; Sweller, Graham & Van

Bergen, 2012). These settings are varied and include separate support classes, as well as

separate special schools. Support classes are housed within mainstream schools and may be situated within the main school campus (as in the case of students with mild intellectual impairment) or behind high fencing elsewhere on the school grounds (as is often the case for students with autism, moderate to severe intellectual disability, and/or disruptive behaviour). There now are over 2000 of these classes in the NSW government school sector – almost one for every public school in the state – however, they tend to be concentrated in densely populated areas, particularly those marked by social disadvantage.

Whilst it is unclear how many support classes specialise in disruptive behaviour, more than one third of the 113 special schools in the NSW government school sector – officially termed "Schools for Specific Purposes" – are now reserved for students with behavioural problems (Graham, 2012). Not surprisingly, this increase in placement availability corresponds with a significant increase in the exclusion of students from mainstream schools (Graham & Sweller, 2011). Like support classes, the location of these special schools is also associated with urban density and social disadvantage, however, unlike some forms of alternative education provision (Jahnukainen, 2001; te Riele, 2007; Thomson & Russell, 2009; McKeown, 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2013; Cleaver & Riddle, 2014), these "alternative placement options" are anything but "alternative"; that is, if alternative is taken to represent a progressive, student-centred focus on "learning choice" (te Riele, 2007, p. 57). It is important therefore to distinguish this particular group of NSW government special schools – colloquially known as "behaviour schools" – from other more common forms of alternative education, as these sites differ from the settings described elsewhere in this special issue.

There has been very little research on NSW behaviour schools to date; however, in a review aimed at mapping alternative education provision in Australia, te Riele (2007) placed this type of school at the "student" end of a *changing educational provision—changing the*

student practice dimension (p. 60). Indeed, NSW behaviour schools are the type of setting

that was ruled *out* of McGregor and Mills' (2012) study of alternative schooling, which

specifically aimed at researching "practices in sites deemed non-mainstream" (p. 848).

Although there is some diversity within this group of special schools, te Riele's (2006)

characterisation would be an accurate portrayal of the behaviour school model itself. Having

emerged from Australia's largest parallel special education system, NSW government

behaviour schools are underpinned by a "remove, rehabilitate, return" model (Granite &

Graham, 2011); an approach and purpose that McGregor and Mills (2012) describe as

"'fixing" students "to fit the mainstream" (p. 848). The history of these schools corresponds

closely with their purpose and, despite questions as to their effectiveness dating back some 20

years (Bradshaw, 1994; 1997), there has been significant increase in behaviour school

placements since these questions were first raised (Graham & Sweller, 2011).

The emergence of "behaviour" schools in New South Wales

Historically, separate placements for students with disability in the NSW government

school sector were available in what were once known as "Opportunity Classes" (McRae,

1996).[i] Between the 1950s and 1980s, fourteen special schools for the "emotionally and

behaviourally disturbed" emerged from this disability support model (McRae, 1996). A

number of these "ED/BD" special schools were housed in or affiliated with child and

adolescent psychiatric units in major hospitals, but just as many were not. The latter type of

ED/BD special school, operating outside the hospital system, catered to disaffected,

disruptive and low-attaining young people with relatively severe behavioural issues. Amid

growing demands from mainstream schools and professional associations, and in the context

of a "tough on crime" state government agenda (Vinson, 2001; Conway, 2006), the decision

was taken to establish more of this type of special school. The first in a new series of what

became known as "behaviour schools" were established in the 1990s, "as part of the 1989 Special Education Plan to provide appropriate alternate placements for students with Oppositional Defiance Disorder and Conduct Disorder" (Inca Consulting, 2009, p. 8). At the time, it was not considered appropriate to house these students with those already enrolled in ED/BD schools, although research has since found that many students in behaviour schools are indistinguishable from those in ED/BD schools and vice versa (Graham, 2012; Van Bergen, Graham, Sweller & Dodd, 2015).

Aside from the few child/adolescent psychiatric units, the main difference between the original ED/BD special schools and the more recent behaviour schools is administrative (Graham, 2012). ED/BD schools require a confirmation of disability (within the limited categories eligible for individual funding support) prior to enrolment and are managed by the NSW Department of Education Disability Programs Directorate, whereas behaviour schools do not require a confirmation of disability and are managed by Student Welfare Directorate. This does not mean that students in behaviour schools do not have mental health diagnoses, rather that students whose issues can be framed in terms of disruptive behaviour (rather than disability or mental health) can be placed more quickly and without having to undergo disability verification (Graham, 2012). There are now 27 behaviour schools, in addition to the 14 original ED/BD schools in the NSW government school sector. Together these schools account for much of the increase in special school enrolments since the late 1990s (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997; Dempsey, 2007; Graham & Sweller, 2011).

Why research the experiences of students in NSW behaviour schools?

The use of separate special educational settings or "alternative placement options" is often couched in a language of support or care. In truth, however, there is no "option" when it comes to the segregation of students with disruptive behaviour. This is because the NSW

Labor government amended the 1990 Education Act in 2010 to allow "greater powers to enforce the removal of students with potential and/or demonstrated violent behaviour" to "the education setting which can best eliminate or control the risk posed" (DET, 2010, p. 1). Whilst "potential… violent behaviour" is not defined within the Act, in practice this terminology has also come to mean students who are persistently disruptive (Van Bergen, Graham, Sweller & Dodd, 2015).

A number of concerns about behaviour schools were raised during the *2010 NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with Disability and/or Special Needs* (NSW Parliament, 2010) following a 2009 appraisal commissioned by the NSW Department of Education. The appraisal found that the duration of enrolments in behaviour schools were much longer than the anticipated 6-12 months and that enrolments of up to four years in length were not uncommon (Inca Consulting, 2009). Further questions were raised about the appropriateness of curriculum, given that behaviour schools are staffed on a primary school model and students tend not to receive instruction by subject specialist teachers (Granite & Graham, 2012). This is concerning, given that the average enrolment age is 13 years (equivalent to Year 8 in secondary school where instruction *is* provided by subject specialist teachers). Whilst concerns were predominantly raised about the duration of enrolments in the context of unmet demand from mainstream schools, the Inquiry final report recommended that the NSW Department of Education conduct a full evaluation to determine why students were not returning to mainstream schools and what the effect of spending extended periods enrolled in a behaviour school might be.

To our knowledge, no such departmental evaluation has been conducted. At the same time, however, we were successful in securing funding from the Australian Research Council (DP110103093) to investigate the past and current educational experiences of students referred to special schools for disruptive behaviour and their reintegration to mainstream.

The background to this research was another ARC-funded project which found that enrolments in behaviour schools begin around age 9 and peak at age 13, with an extremely fast drop in enrolments thereafter (Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, 2010). Special schools in NSW juvenile detention centres have an almost identical (but time lagged) profile with enrolments gaining speed at age 13 and peaking at age 17, with a similarly fast drop thereafter. As these findings suggested that students may be graduating from behaviour schools to juvenile detention, questions relating to the effectiveness and impact of NSW behaviour schools became critical. The current project was therefore underpinned by four explicit objectives, which were to:

1. Document how such interventions take form and the ways in which these are perceived by students and school personnel;

2. Trace student memories of their prior schooling experience and what connection, if any, these students make between these experiences and where they are now;

3. Track changes in student attitudes, beliefs and behaviour during and after their enrolment in special schools;

4. Observe and analyse student re-integration to regular schooling to understand what events lead to positive and negative experiences.

This paper engages with the first, second and fourth of our project aims by presenting views on special and mainstream schooling of a group of boys enrolled in five case-study behaviour schools in NSW. Before we begin however, there are a number of factors that came to light in the process of conducting this research, which are important to note here to contextualise both our approach and the focus of this paper. First, our behaviour school sample consists only of boys because gender representation in these schools is affected by Department of Education placement policy. According to participating principals, some of whom have served on placement panels, this policy deliberately diverts girls in order to avoid mixing 'maladjusted' (and, in their words, potentially promiscuous) girls with troubled and/or

troubling boys (Van Bergen, Graham, Sweller & Dodd, 2015). For that reason, we do not examine gender as an issue, nor do we make inferences about boys or boys' education.

Second, our project originally aimed to follow reintegrating students back into mainstream settings, in order to understand why there is so little reintegration from NSW behaviour schools. Although a number had attempted reintegration prior to the commencement of our project in 2011, only one of the 33 boys in this project has successfully returned to date, and this was subsequent to the completion of this three-year project. While lack of reintegration contributes to the perception that behaviour schools have become "long-term holding areas for students that regular schools are either unable or unprepared to work with" (Dempsey, 2007, p. 76), it is important to note that absenteeism is extremely high in some of these schools, particularly amongst older students. Therefore, whilst behaviour schools might be described as "holding areas", this perception is based on the assumption that enrolments equal attendance, whereas our observations would suggest that they do not (Graham & Buckley, 2014). It is crucial therefore to listen to the views of the boys themselves in regards to their own schooling. No amount of broad-brush analysis of enrolment figures, or indeed of interviewing the staff in schools, will determine the boys' own reasons behind their attitudes towards school.

Given continued pressure from mainstream schools and professional associations to increase the number of placements in behaviour schools against the other factors we have raised, we believe it is critical to learn more about these settings from the young people currently enrolled in them, as well to as understand – from their perspectives – what led to their dislike of and exclusion from mainstream. Students with disruptive behaviour, particularly those enrolled in special schools and units, are among the least heard of all student groups, yet we share Sellman's (2009) view that "this often ignored group has both

useful and challenging messages about what constitutes a relevant curriculum and effective teaching style" (p. 35). Indeed, we found the majority of boys were keen to "have a say" about something that had such a big influence on their lives. In the following section, we first describe our study methodology. We then present these students' responses to seven questions about their current and past school experiences.

Research Design & Methodology

Thirty three boys, aged between 9 and 16 years of age (mean 12.8 years) and who were enrolled in special schools for students with disruptive behaviour, each participated in a semi-structured interview. The boys were recruited from five participating case-study special schools, three of which were located in severely disadvantaged communities in NSW, one in an area that is considered moderately disadvantaged, and one from an advantaged area (Vinson, 2007). This mix is reflected in each school's score on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA).[ii] As shown in Table 1 below, the majority of participants (84.85%) were from behaviour schools in low socioeconomic areas with ICSEA scores below the national mean of 1000 (800-999). Two students transferred to other behaviour schools (Schools 3 and 6) during the project, however, both went to schools of the same ICSEA range (for a full description of recruitment criteria and procedure, see Graham, Van Bergen & Sweller, 2015).

Table 1. Participating behaviour schools, distribution of participants, and ICSEA range

School	ICSEA Range	Number of Participants	Percentage
1	800-899	5	15.15%
2	1000-1099	5	15.15%
3	900-999	1	3.03%
4	800-899	6	18.18%
5	800-899	9	27.27%

6	800-899	1	3.03%
7	900-999[iii]	6	18.18%
Total		33	100%

Project information statements were distributed by each of the schools to their students, some of whom took the forms home to their parent/s. Parent consent was received for 39 students, however, six of those students were not attending school, even irregularly, and only 33 students were interviewed. The purpose of the research was fully explained to each participant and student consent was confirmed prior to the interview commencing. As this was a longitudinal project tracking students over an 18 month period, this process was repeated in each of the three interview rounds. Participants were assured that their views mattered, that the research data would be anonymised, that they could withdraw at any time, and that they could say anything they liked. At this point, some students asked if they could swear and all were assured that they could.

Transcribers were instructed to faithfully transcribe exactly what was said and asked not to overlay these students' voices with middle class vernacular by correcting grammar or pronunciation. This was important both for authenticity and to retain the authorial integrity of the speaker (see discussion in Graham & Buckley, 2014). During the interview students were free to move around in ways that made them feel comfortable, such as get a drink, have a snack, roll on the floor, do push-ups, play chess with the interviewer, teach them to make origami, or leave and resume (or not) later if they so wished. At the conclusion of each interview, students were compensated for their time with a double movie voucher (for a full description of interview procedure, see Graham & Buckley, 2014).

Each first round interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and featured up to 75 questions in total. For the purposes of this paper, we analyse student responses to seven questions from the section of the interview focusing on attitudes to and experiences of school:

1. "Do you like school?"

2. "When did you begin disliking school?"

3. "What happened to make you start disliking school?"

4. "What kind of school is this?"

5. "Why do YOU think you were sent to this school?"

6. "Are you happier in this school than your previous school/s?"

7. "Would you like to go back to your old school or stay in this school?"

Individual responses to each of these questions were coded using inductive content analysis to identify categories of responses arising from the data (Berg, 2001). Categories were established until all response types had been exhausted. For example, in relation to the first question, "Do you like school?" responses were coded into four categories: (i) No, (ii) Yes, (iii) Equivocal (e.g., "Sort of", "Sometimes", "I like it now but I didn't used to"), and (iv) Don't know/No answer. Questions eliciting a broader range of responses, such as "Why do you think you were sent to this school?" were coded into thematic categories, including (i) my behaviour, (ii) only option available, (iii) need more support/help, and (iv) don't know/no answer. Singular responses to any of the interview questions were grouped into the category of 'other', however, the majority of responses to the questions in this paper fit within the main categories reported.

This approach to data analysis was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, whilst this paper focuses on the responses of 33 boys in behaviour schools, this group is a sub-set in a larger mixed-methods project involving 96 students in total: 33 students in behaviour schools, 21 students with a history of severely disruptive behaviour in mainstream schools, and 42 students with no history of disruptive behaviour enrolled in mainstream. In other analyses using the full dataset, we have converted each response to ordinal variables to enable statistical comparisons between these three participant groups (see Graham, Van Bergen & Sweller, 2015). It is important to maintain the same method of data coding for the subset of students involved in this paper as for the larger cohort, so that no systematic differences resulting from coding discrepancies could arise between the three student groups. Secondly,

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as this was an interdisciplinary project involving both qualitative and quantitative researchers from very different paradigms, we took great care in the process of coding to ensure that each response was accounted for in the shared belief that each student's view was important; in effect, that every student's "vote" counts. We did this for two main reasons: (i) because not all participants can be quoted in the text and we felt strongly that each participant's response must be "registered" in a transparent way, and (ii) because we anticipated that some students may not be willing or able to answer all questions and it was important to be clear about how "strong" or otherwise our analyses were. In the following section, we report our analyses using descriptive statistics and present illustrative quotes for transparency. We begin with the boys' responses to our questions on school liking.

"Do you like school?"

Our interview opened with the question "Do you like school?" to which the majority of participating students (n= 29) either responded negatively (n = 16) or indicated that they liked (or were ambivalent towards) school now, but that they didn't like school when they were in mainstream (n = 13). The latter type of response is typified by the statements made by 12 year old Zack:

Interviewer:	Do you like school?
Zack:	It's alright.
Interviewer:	Have you always liked school?
Zack:	Nuh.

Each of the 29 boys who said they disliked school was then asked when and why they began disliking school, while all 33 boys were asked what type of school they were now attending, whether they knew why they had changed schools, whether they were happier in the

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behaviour school and whether they wanted to return to mainstream. Their responses to each of these questions are discussed in turn.

"Do you remember when you began to dislike school?"

When asked when they began to dislike school, the majority of our 29 "school dislikers" said that they began having trouble in the early years (K-2).

> "I've hated school my entire life. I just can't do it. When I was young I'd think, "You know all those teachers who are just OLD and you go, I hope I don't get this person next year?" From kindergarten all the way to Year 6, I actually had a whole row of them!" (Ethan, age 15)

The middle years (5-8) were the second most common response (see Figure 1). It should be noted that at the time of the interview, some boys were not yet in the oldest year group noted in Figure 1 (years 9-10). It is possible that the younger age of our participants might contribute to the small number of boys who nominated the older bracket as the time they began to dislike school.
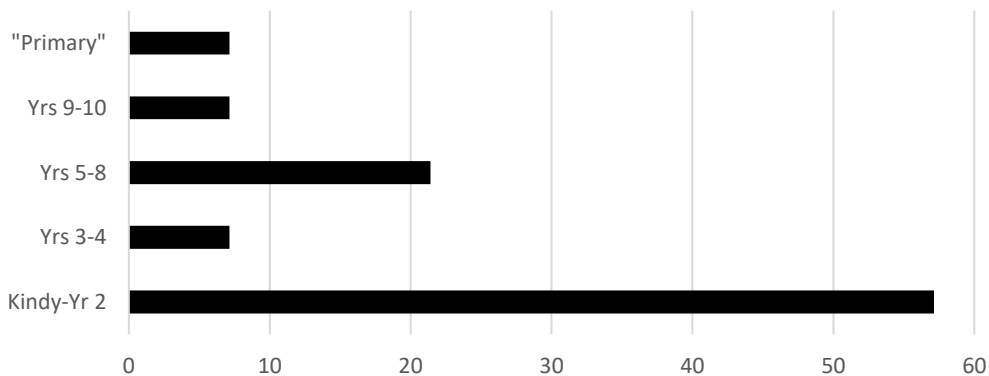

Figure 1. Percentage of participants and the age they recall disliking school

Nonetheless, our sample is broadly representative of the student population in NSW behaviour schools. Behaviour schools cater for students in Years 5 to 12 (age 9-17), however,

as we mentioned earlier, previous research has found that enrolments peak at age 13 and drop sharply from there (Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, 2010). Therefore, whilst there may be many young people who began disliking school in the secondary years in the general school population, these young people are not typically enrolled in behaviour schools. Further, and in terms of gender, boys are significantly overrepresented in NSW behaviour schools with nine boys for every girl enrolled (Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, 2010). As discussed earlier however, gender representation in behaviour schools is affected by NSW Department of Education placement policy and should not be taken to mean that only boys engage in severely disruptive behaviour. For example, whilst there is still some reluctance to mix genders in behaviour support classes, girls are more visible in these settings with three boys for every girl enrolled (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011).[iv] Rather than reflect the relative severity of boys' behaviour, the gender representation in NSW behaviour schools (and by virtue our sample) should be interpreted as one effect of an administrative decision making process that more readily excludes boys.

"What happened to make you start disliking school?"

Each of the 29 boys who said they did not like school was then asked why they started disliking school, however, only 27 were able to answer the question. Responses were coded into five categories including schoolwork, teachers, institutional practices (e.g., discipline/ no-smoking policies), peers, and "other" (e.g., having to wake up early).

Almost half of the participants nominated issues relating to "schoolwork". Whilst many of these boys referred to a generic sense of boredom, others indicated that their difficulties in school began with an increase in curricular demand, which corresponded with a decrease in enjoyable activities.

It just got boring and harder. (Michael, age 14)

Just all the work and the homework and everythin'. I got over it and - when I was in Year 3 just started misbehavin' and everythin'. (Charlie, age 13)

Almost one third of participants nominated issues to do with "teachers". These responses centred on issues relating to teacher power, teacher attitudes and teacher behaviour with these students describing how teachers would treat them because they weren't one of the "smart kids", or because they had a "family reputation", or because they didn't have the "right" uniform.

...just because I wasn't one of the smart kids, they basically just kind of push you off to the side, didn't have anything to do with you and just kind of left you. They didn't care. (Corbin, age 15)

The teachers. They always target me. Because of my sister and my brother. Because they were always naughty and that. They were always misbehaved. (Cameron, age 13)

The Principal, like, the deputy always… like it was like she was always trying to get me suspended and stuff and the teachers were always… like the sport teacher would always pick on me about my shoes and that because they weren't black, and that's when I didn't start going to school. (Jett, age 14)

In some cases, the boys felt baited into behaving poorly, with the teachers' own emotional behaviour leading to an escalation in teacher-student conflict. Twelve-year-old Andy, for example, described how battles over schoolwork would escalate to the point where he would erupt in frustration.

One time I didn't want to do work and the teacher went off at me, and I just, just went off and then I clicked. (Andy, age 12)

This first occurred when Andy was the "new boy" in Year 2 and was being bullied every day by the other kids because "everyone picks on the new person". Andy said he felt sad and depressed because "no one thought of me as a friend" but also frustrated because he couldn't do the work he was being told to do. Feeling "like no one was going to help me", Andy said he "clicked" and "smashed up the classroom".

Fifteen year old Ethan was one of a number of students who believed that he was being targeted by his teachers in an effort to eject him from the classroom.

> They're just *asking* me to do something. And I've actually felt at times that they've wanted me to, just to get me out of the class. All of my friends have felt that. We all agree on that. (Ethan, age 15).

Whilst such statements might sometimes be dismissed as paranoia or an attempt to justify disruption, Ethan's suspicion resonated with the stories told by each of the behaviour school principals. During interviews, and unprompted, each principal noted the tactics that mainstream schools and teachers use to provoke students so that they can then suspend that child, justify their placement in a separate setting, or prevent their reintegration to mainstream.

In other cases, teachers were nominated as the reason for disliking school simply because they were associated with "schoolwork": something that the boys found too hard or didn't want to do. Eleven year old James, for example, described how he began disliking school in Year 1 (around age 6). When asked why he began to dislike school, James replied "Teachers". However, further questioning revealed that James disliked his Year 1 teacher, Mr O, because "He made me do too much work" and James found the work difficult. Mr O was later replaced by Miss J but, according to James, the problem worsened because "She gave me *harder* work." Some students' dislike of teachers therefore may be partly associated with

the increasing demands of the academic curriculum, although elsewhere in the interview the boys were quite vocal about the harsh tactics that some teachers employ to make students do their work.

Interestingly, although bullying and peer conflict were consistent themes elsewhere in the interviews, only three students cited issues to do with peers as the reason they began to dislike school. Two of these students had experienced sustained bullying and the third had experienced significant difficulties relating to other children and disclosed that he had later been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. These students stated that they liked the behaviour school because it had fewer students and therefore less people to deal with.

What kind of school is this?

We were interested to learn whether the students in these special schools perceived these schools as being different to their previous schools and, if so, in what ways. We were also interested in the language they would draw on to describe or name the type of school. To begin this discussion, we asked participating students to tell us what kind of school they were now attending. Of the 29 students who responded, one student said that it was a special school, and two referred to it as just a 'regular' school. Perhaps misinterpreting the question, another nine students gave general comments as to the school characteristics, like "It's a good school", "This one listens to you", and "It's a guarded school… like, there's always a teacher watching you". The majority (18) of the boys, however, used the colloquial term 'behaviour school'. The ubiquity of this term is somewhat worrying, and may negatively impact on young peoples' developing sense of self (Tremblay, Saucier & Tremblay, 2004; Yang, Wonpat-Borja, Opler & Corcoran, 2010), as well as the ability of behaviour schools to reorient focus on learning. These were both issues that we sought to investigate with a follow-up question.

"Why do YOU think you were sent to this school?"

As the psychological research literature suggests that children and young people with behavioural disorders lack self-awareness and are inclined to positively self-enhance (Colvin, Block & Funder, 1995; Owens, Goldfine, Evangelista, Hoza & Kaiser, 2007), we were interested in the reasons (self or other) that these young people attributed to their referral to a behaviour school.[v] Further, and in line with the second objective of our ARC project, we were interested to know whether the young people perceived separate special schools to be a form of support (as they are framed in NSW Department of Education discourse) or whether they viewed being sent to the behaviour school as a consequence of, or punishment for, their past behaviour.

When asked why *they* thought they'd been sent to the behaviour school, seven of the 33 participants either did not answer or said they did not know. Of the remaining 26 students, four stated that the behaviour school was their only remaining option (e.g. "Because I'm not allowed to go to any other schools"). Another six participants provided responses that were framed in the language of support. These responses tended to be less focused on what the students were or had been doing in the past and more on their environment and/or what they needed:

Because I still need way more help. (Aiden, age 12)

Uh, because I had problems doing my work. That's what the teachers told me.

(Owen, age 12)

Notwithstanding these less common responses however, the majority (n = 16) named their own behaviour as the reason they had been sent to the behaviour school and none blamed 'others' for their referral. Rather than provide evidence for self-enhancement or poor self-awareness theories, the range of responses we received lend more support for the theory – found in both psychological and poststructural analyses – that the labelling and exclusion of

students for behavioural reasons may negatively affect developing identities or self-concepts (Tremblay, Saucier & Tremblay, 2004; Yang, Wonpat-Borja, Opler & Corcoran, 2010; Graham, 2015a).

Table 2: Behavioural explanations for enrolment in the behaviour school

Pseudonym	Age	Reason
Zack	12	Fightin' and swearin'. Got suspended.
Andy	12	Because of anger.
John	13	For being bad.
Ahi	13	Because of my behaviour at [X school] and [Y school]
Tom	15	Behaviour. Oh, truancy. I truant a lot, at my old school. But I don't truant anymore now, since I came here.
Nathan	13	Um, (yawn) because of my behaviour.
Cooper	16	Because of my bad behaviour. Mum just thought it would be a good idea.
Darrin	12	Ah, being silly. Being silly and stupid.
Blake	12	Because I'm too wild.
George	15	'Cause of my behaviour at [Z school]. Just how I couldn't cope with all of the students.
Luke	13	Probably because of last year. I was mucking up in class. I was always at the principal's office. (pause) Swearin' at teachers.
Nick	15	Because I've been truanting a lot.
Reuben	12	I used to hang with the wrong crowd.
Adam	14	For my behaviour.
Patrick	10	Because my naughtiness.
Justin	13	Because I've got issues, because like, I've been naughty in mainstream.

This is an interesting finding given the explicit focus of one of the behaviour schools from which we drew our largest number of participants (n = 9). The teachers and leadership team at this school explicitly state to their new students that they have not been sent there because of their behaviour but because their behaviour is "getting in the way of their learning". Whilst this may seem to be a subtle play on words, this emphasis is reinforced in the school's responses to student behaviour where the focus is on learning: academic, social

and emotional. However, seven of the 12 students listed in Table 1 above were attending this particular behaviour school (and had been for considerable time), which suggests that earlier messages about "bad" behaviour, and perhaps the referral experience itself, may have had a more powerful and indelible effect than the reparation work that is now occurring in the behaviour school.

"Have you felt happier in this school than your other schools?"

Two students in our sample did not provide an answer to this question. Of the 31 students who responded, the majority (n = 25) said that they were happier in the behaviour school. Not all of these students were able to explain why they preferred the behaviour school (n = 6) but there was an interesting pattern in the responses of those who did (n = 19). Whilst one of these students named differences related to the school building and facilities, such as the existence of a "rec room" with "a Wii and a Playstation and drinks vouchers" (Harry, age 11), another two raised less obvious differences, such as shorter school hours and differences in curriculum offerings.

Because you get to go home early. (Andy, age 12)

Because I get to do wood burning, woodwork and everything else. (Costa, 12)

Despite the dominance of schoolwork in responses to our previous question asking why they began to dislike school, participants rarely reported feeling happier in the behaviour school for academic reasons. Although two students implied that they preferred the behaviour school because it was "easier" (Grant, age 12) and "more fun" (Reuben, age 12), possibly referring to the types of curricular activities and lower academic demand reported elsewhere, other aspects of schoolwork and learning were typically referred to in the context of describing a positive and supportive teacher-student relationship.

Indeed, relationships featured prominently in students' descriptions of why they were happier in the behaviour school than their previous school. While there were differences in

the types of relationships that mattered, the majority of the 19 students (n = 10) who were able to explain why they were happier in the behaviour school described supportive teachers and positive teacher-student relationships. In tandem with responses outlining why some participants disliked teachers, teacher-student relationships again appeared bound to issues relating to teacher-student interactions, particularly around the completion of schoolwork. This time, however, the relationship was positive. As can be seen from the collection of responses in Table 2 below, "teachers" and "schoolwork" were often raised in the same breath. Potentially influencing these boys' positive perceptions of their behaviour school teachers was the level of support provided, a more democratic approach, and differentiation of curriculum to match student ability.

Table 3. Teacher- and curriculum-related reasons for preferring the behaviour school to previous school/s.

Pseudonym	Age	Reason
Ethan	13	Just the less work and the possibility of negotiating. (Ethan, age 14)
Tom	15	I dunno, probably teachers are more laid back, I can get along with these teachers. You can have a mad conversation with them... so that's alright.
Cooper	16	Because [School X] was all about working, [School Y] was all about commitment. This is about helping you behave, making a fresh start with support and doing school work at the same time.
George	15	Just got better teachers, better work… better everything.
Nick	15	All the teachers are, like, really, really nice. Like, they make me feel like, more welcome. Well, whenever I'm working, like, they always know, like, when I need help. Like, they'll come up to me straight away and ask if I need help.
Jake	13	Because it's helped me out and that's a good thing.
James	11	Better people. Teachers nicer.
Michael	14	It's like, it's easier here, because you get more help with work. Like, you learn more because there's more teachers to help you out.
Eamon	12	That I know I'm getting stuff done. That I know that I can maybe pass.
Patrick	10	Um, because I get to be much better at my learning.

Only four of the 19 students who could explain why they were happier in the behaviour school – Aiden, John, Ahi and Owen – referred to more positive *peer* relationships:

Well, I'm making a bit more friends here. (Aiden, age 12)

'Cause it like, at the other schools everyone torments you and that, making you wanna fight. Makes me wanna fight them and that. (John, age 13)

Because at this school, I get, um... I get, um...the same as all the other kids. I'm not different out of all of them. I don't have my own problems, we've all got the same problems. Yeah. (Ahi, age 13)

I dunno. Just... people like me here but at my other schools they just don't like me. (Owen, age 12)

Of the six students who said that they were *not* happier in the behaviour school, only three were able to articulate why. The first, Darrin (age 12), said that he felt the same in the behaviour school as he had at his previous school because he had "moved schools so many times". The other two participants – Justin and Andreas – reported being happier in their previous (mainstream) schools: one because of his connection to old friends and the other because he missed the "normality" of mainstream school culture.

Because I miss my mates. (Justin, age 13)

I'd prefer to be in a mainstream school and have like - just because, I don't know, like I want to put on a school uniform. I want to wear a backpack, put my books in my bag, take the school laptop. I just want to - like I just want to be at the normal school. (Andreas, age 14)

Interestingly, these two perspectives were also evident in the responses to our next question.

"Would you like to go back to your old school or stay in this school?"

One student did not answer this question and another was equivocal in response. The remaining 31 participants were relatively evenly split with 16 wishing to return to mainstream and 15 wishing to stay in the behaviour school. This was a particularly surprising result given that the majority of participants had told us that they were happier in the behaviour school. Closer analysis of these responses showed that 11 of the 16 students who wished to return to mainstream were ones who had specifically stated that they *were* happier in the behaviour school. In other words, almost half of all the students who earlier said they were happier in the behaviour school *still* wished to return to mainstream. All 5 of the remaining students who stated that they wished to return to mainstream were students who had said they were *not* happier in the behaviour school.

The reasons given by the 15 students who wanted to stay in the behaviour school resonated with the reasons they said they were happier there: "nicer" and more supportive teachers, easier work, more relevant curriculum, fewer students and better peer relationships. Perhaps more interesting, in the context of this paper, are the reasons that the other 16 gave for wishing to return. These responses fell into two main categories: peer relationships and "normal" or mainstream school participation. In relation to the latter category, a small number of students alluded to a perception that the mainstream was "better", referring to rites of passage like Year 12 and other forms of school participation.

> Well, I want, like, a better education. Like, I want to go into Year 12 and that. (Nick, age 15)

> It just upsets – like upsets me because all of my high school year, I was at – I was in a behaviour school. I wanted to at least get one of those jerseys with your name written

on the back and all of that? Yeah, I wanted all of that. Just to be in a mainstream

school. (Andreas, 14)

Three students made isolated comments that suggested that they were "bored" by the behaviour school (Luke, age 13), that their parents were considering other options (Eamon, age 12), or that they felt a sense of 'belonging' to their old school that they didn't feel at the behaviour school (Quade, age 16).

There's a school that my Mum's been thinking about. It's Saint [X]'s, I believe. It's a

Catholic school but I'm not going there for the Catholic stuff. (Eamon, age 12)

Yeah. I want to – I would have done, I still would do, anything to go back to [X

school]. That's just my main school. That's where I want to be. (Quade, age 16)

The most consistent response category (10 students) related to peer relationships. For example, Patrick (age 10) and Ethan (age 14) both reported wanting to leave the behaviour school so they could re-join their friends in mainstream. Although each had stated that they were happier in the behaviour school – Ethan because there was less work and "the possibility of negotiating" and Patrick "because I get to be much better at my learning" – neither of these positive aspects of the behaviour school had as much pull as the desire to return to their friends. As discussed previously, 13 year old Justin had never warmed to the behaviour school because he missed his "best mate" and he reiterated this as the reason for wanting to return.

Conversely, some students wanted to return to their old school to avoid their peers in the behaviour school. Sixteen year old Quade, for example, said that he liked the behaviour school but that he was not *happier* there and was very angry that his mum had applied for enrolment. Quade had concerns about the other students in the behaviour school and wanted to return to mainstream to be among "normal" peers.

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I prefer to be normal, so I've got people to talk to at least. (Quade, age 16)

Quade's concerns were echoed by 13 year old Max, who had been equivocal about whether he would like to return to his old school or not. Max was a school refuser whom we initially had to visit at home. When we first met him, Max was enrolled in one of our five participating behaviour schools, but not attending. When we interviewed him a few months later, Max was attending a separate support unit in a mainstream secondary school on a partial enrolment (part-time) basis. When we asked him whether he would like to return to his "old school" (the behaviour school that he had refused to attend) Max, of course, said no. However, he was adamant that he did *not* want to stay where he was, wishing instead to transfer to a regular classroom on the main (mainstream) school campus. As he was still only able to attend the behaviour support unit for half-days, reintegration to mainstream was very unlikely to occur in the near future. This was a source of great irritation to Max, who believed that the alternative setting and the peers to whom he was exposed in that setting were holding him back.

> But – I want to go in a normal class – because I have autism they stick me in a class with complete arseholes… we have a class pretty much, where all of the baddest kids go in. 'Cause if they stuck one of these kids in a normal class… he'd be walking around doing stuff, never putting their hand up to speak, not even doing their work. They wouldn't last very long in there. It'd mess everyone up. Where we have a small bunch, like eight kids of the worst. They stick the worst with the worst and the best with the best. Me, I'm able to work in those other rooms with the normal kids. I want that, because I can control myself. I like quiet. I just want to do my work in peace.

Students like Max and Quade were in the minority, however. The majority of students in our sample preferred the behaviour school for the positive teacher-student relationships, but

judging from the desire to return to their old schools, it seems these relationships were not enough to keep them all there.

Implications for policy and school practice

The boys in our study demonstrate a troubling, although perhaps not surprising, pattern of school like / dislike. While approximately half indicated that they liked the behaviour school, the vast majority disliked their previous (mainstream) school/s and most began feeling this way in the early years of primary (K-2). More than half of those who reported disliking their previous school cited reasons relating to difficulties with schoolwork, followed by negative and conflictual relationships with mainstream school teachers. Issues included poor or biased treatment and teachers being associated with schoolwork that the boys could not or did not want to do: factors which have been shown to strongly predict poorer-quality teacher-student relationships (see McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015, for a review). Very few students cited reasons involving their peers or institutional issues.

The majority of our participants knew why they had been sent to a behaviour school. Although a fifth of the boys couldn't answer or didn't know why, of those who could, most cited their own behaviour as the primary reason. It is important to note, given prior research attesting to poor self-awareness and self-enhancement, that these boys did not try and sugar-coat or pretend their behaviour was somebody else's fault. Rather, the boys in our study readily acknowledged their behaviour, whilst also taking the opportunity to voice their opinions about contributing factors, including a lack of academic support and hostile teacher behaviours in their formative school years. The boys' responses indicated, however, that the majority viewed the behaviour school as a punishment or consequence of their past behaviour, rather than a means by which they could receive more support. The prevalence of this view suggests that their previous school experiences, and the process of exclusion itself, may have a shaping effect that is difficult to undo once done. The ubiquity of the colloquial

term "behaviour school" (used by the majority of boys when asked "What kind of school is this?") is certainly unhelpful in this regard and changing the language characterising this type of special school (e.g., to 'Support School' or 'Transition School') would be a simple but positive first step.

Despite the perception that they had been sent to the behaviour school as a punishment or consequence, most students indicated that they felt happier there. The reasons given by the boys suggest that the teachers in the behaviour schools in our study are very good at building positive teacher-student relationships and moderating curriculum demands; thereby mitigating the main issues that the boys had with their previous schools. However, lack of academic rigour and credentials was a drawback for some boys, whilst loss of friends and the lack of potential to make new ones was of greater consequence for others. More than half of the boys who said that they were happier in the behaviour school also said that they wanted to return to mainstream, suggesting that the behaviour schools are not able to fully satisfy the academic and/or social needs of all the students they enrol.

These findings are troubling, but they make more sense if we remember the specific purpose for which behaviour schools were originally designed; that is, "to fix students to fit the mainstream" (McGregor & Mills, 2012, p. 848). Such an approach is underpinned by the logic of mainstream/special education (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Artiles, 2003), however, the problem with this logic is that it assumes the "mainstream" plays no part in producing the students that the behaviour schools are called in to fix. A related issue – one which underpins the philosophy of inclusive education – is that in providing an "alternative to" or a "safety valve" for the mainstream (Tomlinson, 1982), special education ultimately acts as an enabler, forestalling the types of reforms that might otherwise lead to a more inclusive and effective system overall; one in which there is no such thing as a "mainstream" (Graham & Slee, 2008). In other words, the existence of "alternative placement options" encourages some

schools to continue engaging in practices that fail to meet the needs of all of their students, in the belief that there is and should be somewhere else for those students to go (Slee, 2011; Graham, 2015b). However, judging by the growth in separate special educational settings over time, together with the decline in mainstream enrolments in the NSW government school sector (Sweller, Graham & Van Bergen, 2012), the mainstream has become increasingly exclusive in recent years and, thus, ever harder to "fit".

Exclusionary practices appear to be limiting reintegration as well, severely limiting the effectiveness of behaviour schools in the process. As we mentioned earlier, only one of the 33 boys in our study ever managed to return to mainstream during this three year research project, however, the reasons for this are complex and not simply because behaviour schools fail to "rehabilitate". Whilst it is clear that some students make little progress, there are many others whose attitude and behaviour changed completely in a calmer, more respectful and supportive environment. Yet, even these students foundered when attempting to reintegrate. During a separate interview conducted as part of the larger project on which this research is based, one participating behaviour school principal summed up the problem by saying:

> If you're going to force a school to take a student back just because they have to, and the culture hasn't changed and the behaviours of that school haven't changed, the behaviours of the teachers haven't changed, the behaviours of the kids that go there haven't changed, then you're actually going to just send that kid back there to get expelled. He'll lose his place in a school like this and he'll have to start all over again, which will be more destructive to the kids.

For this reason, the behaviour school principals in our study have largely given up on "reintegration", focusing instead on preparing their students to transition to apprenticeships or technical/vocational education. While this shift in focus may also help to

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explain why there is so little reintegration to mainstream, there are serious problems with this approach. Firstly, and as we noted earlier, the average age of students in behaviour schools is 13 years, which means that most students will spend years in the behaviour school before they are old enough to transition to an adult learning environment around the age of 16 or 17. Secondly, the creation of a competitive vocational education and training market has "placed a premium upon particular types of courses and particular types of students" (Graham, Van Bergen & Sweller, 2015, p. 252), leaving very limited further education opportunities for students with learning and behavioural difficulties. Thirdly, and perhaps most critically, the ability of these young people to successfully engage in further education is highly dependent on the depth and quality of their learning in the behaviour school setting, given that many arrive there at the beginning of the middle years of school (Years 5-7). *But*, if behaviour schools cannot satisfy these students' academic, social, emotional and developmental needs *and* if students subsequently do not attend, their opportunities to learn and to progress into further education and training become extremely limited.

The implication of this research for education policy and practice is that behaviour schools are not the solution to disruptive behaviour in mainstream schools. Whilst these settings do fulfil a function for some, the early school experiences and placement preferences of the majority of the boys in our study suggest that "mainstream" school reform is of first order importance. Taken together, these boys' accounts suggest that mainstream schools can start by improving the ways in which students with early learning and behavioural difficulties are supported – academically *and* emotionally – and by changing how teachers interact with these students. This may help to limit the flow of excluded students, however, it is also critical that referring schools examine their own culture and practices to enable these students' return following enrolment in a behaviour school.

Conclusion

This study investigated the current and past educational experiences of 33 boys attending separate "behaviour" schools. Participants were asked whether they liked school, when and why they began disliking school, what type of school they were now attending, whether they knew why they had changed schools, whether they were happier in the special school, and whether they wanted to return to mainstream. The majority of participants began disliking school in the early years due to difficulties with school work and conflictual relationships with teachers. The majority of the boys in our study also stated that they preferred being in the behaviour school, however, perhaps a more important question is why they began disliking school in the first place and why they say they prefer being in the behaviour school. This is critical because our findings indicate that being happier in the behaviour school does not necessarily translate to wanting to remain there.

The desire to return to old friends or a "normal" environment in which these boys might be able to develop positive emotional connections with their peers exerted a surprisingly strong pull; even for students who stated that they are happier in the behaviour school and who reported very negative mainstream school experiences. Their narratives suggest that an increase in placement availability may satisfy the demands of mainstream schools looking to exclude students with disruptive behaviour, but this is unlikely to lead to improved outcomes for the young people themselves. Fundamentally, their exclusion does not encourage or promote change within the mainstream school system and neither does it seem that the behaviour schools are able to fully satisfy the academic or social, emotional and developmental needs of all of the young people they enrol.

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[i] Over time the use of the word "opportunity" was replaced with "support" for classes for students with disability, but was retained for academically selective classes in flagship primary schools.

[ii] All schools in Australia are given an ICSEA score: a calculation of the relative affluence of the school community (ACARA, 2013). ICSEA has a mean of 1000 and a standard deviation of 100. Note, as geographic information or single ICSEA scores could reveal the identity of the schools, only ICSEA ranges have been provided here.

[iii] Where an ICSEA score was not available, a composite score comprising participating students' home postcode and the ICSEA score of their local government high school was constructed. Exact ICSEA scores are not reported as these could reveal participating schools' identities.

[iv] Similarly, in the larger project from which our behaviour school data is drawn, girls accounted for almost a quarter of students in our mainstream behaviour group nominated by mainstream school principals (see Graham, Van Bergen, Sweller, 2015).

[v] Our findings here, as well as others based on analyses of participants' self-characterisations (Graham, 2015a; Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, forthcoming), do not provide support for this hypothesis.