

**Policy in practice: Enabling and inhibiting factors for the success of suspension
centres**

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Author note

The author will hence be known as Alison Jane Moore.

The author dedicates this research to her parents, Jan and Merv Benoit, whose encouragement, love, and support provided the basis for tackling life in all its joyous forms. Thank you to my husband, Scott, for your love, understanding and caring.

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Candidate's certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis/portfolio has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

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Abstract

The overarching question for this research is: “What are the differences between ‘espoused educational policy’ and ‘policy in use’ in relation to suspension centres?” (Cohen, 2000; Schön, 1995). To answer this question, stakeholders were asked their opinions based on research sub-questions: what are the best things happening with suspension centres or what should be maintained with suspension centres?; what needs to be improved with suspension centres?; and what evidence is there that suspension centres are meeting the Purpose and Goals as outlined in the Guidelines?

Disruptive student behaviour continues to be a serious issue in schools.

Suspension centres are a recent government initiative to help address this issue in NSW government schools. The centres are for students on long suspension from school who have been identified as being likely to benefit from a structured program to assist their successful return to schooling. Schön (1995) makes the case for those people who design policy to “get interested” in what the policy means to practitioners in the field as the ways in which the policy is used can be very different from the “policy intention” (p. 33). Schon’s concerns could be very pertinent in regard to the suspension centres which have never been formally evaluated.

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase One, semi-structured interviews, were implemented with stakeholders including students, their parents, mentors, suspension centre staff, and regional personnel associated with the centres, while students were at the centres. Responses revealed that the best things happening or things that should be maintained were that: students were learning skills related to academic activities and behaviour and that suspension centre staff were using appropriate approaches and had good skills in managing students with disruptive behaviour. Such practices enabled the success of suspension centres.

Things that needed to be improved and potentially inhibited the success of the centres were: communication and use of suspension centres; that head teachers required further professional learning; and that students' schools needed to provide ongoing support for students who were referred to the centres.

Phase Two, questionnaire surveys, further supported Phase One of this research and aimed to discover whether the centres were meeting aspects of the Purpose and Goals as outlined in the suspension centre Guidelines. The surveys were completed by students, their parents, and mentors on day one or two of the students' placements at the centres and then four weeks after the students had finished their placements. Responses revealed that for a small number of students, no positive changes in their behaviour or learning were described. Such students were described as having severe and entrenched behaviours and/or significant learning and/or behaviour needs. The majority of students were described as having some or significant positive changes in their behaviour and/or learning. Responses revealed that students had learnt new skills; were identifying the skills or strategies they had learnt; and were trying to put, or putting, the skills into practice. Students were described as having built some capacity to reflect on, and understand, their behaviour and its consequences.

Recommendations from this research included that: research should be conducted to determine whether the positive changes in students' behaviour and/or learning are sustained when students return to their schools from suspension centres beyond the four weeks pertinent to this research; that the Department of Education and Communities devise a mechanism for policy and practice to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of suspension centre practices, and revise and refine processes to identify and respond to the referral of students who are "less likely to benefit" from suspension centre placements; and a range of practices be implemented to support the

professional learning needs of suspension centre staff to enable sharing of good strategies and practices, and support staff in their unique and often isolated roles.

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