sent home:
the impact on the family of a child's exclusion from school

ANDREW SMITH
BETHLEHEM TERTIARY INSTITUTE

The Families Commission was established under the Families Commission Act 2003 and commenced operations on 1 July 2004. Under the Crown Entities Act 2004, the Commission is designated as an autonomous Crown entity.

A key role of the Commission is to promote research on issues that will give the Commission and the public a better understanding of family life. The Blue Skies Fund provides funding for dynamic new work that examines contemporary and emerging family issues. The fund is intended for new research, emergent ideas and 'ideas papers' which have the potential to lead to new research.

For more information on the Blue Skies Fund, visit www.nzfamilies.org.nz

sent home:
the impact on the family of a child's exclusion from school

ANDREW SMITH
BETHLEHEM TERTIARY INSTITUTE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While international literature asserts that research interest in suspension and exclusion from school is increasing, few studies have considered the impact of exclusion on families or given voice to parents' views. This study aims to fill the apparent gap, and present the thoughts and feelings of New Zealand families affected by exclusion.

This project explored the experiences and perceptions of a small group of New Zealand parents, each of whom was responsible for a teenager who had been excluded from school during 2007. Eight individuals or couples were accessed through an alternative education provider and interviewed, and transcripts were analysed for emergent themes. Each interview is presented as a cameo endorsed by the participant.

The parents, who seemed caring and articulate, reported significant negative emotional and practical effects, including feelings of sadness, anger, powerlessness and puzzlement. They expressed strong views on both the process and its effect on their family; often, they thought that communication had been lacking and impersonal. Parents reported feeling that they were being punished for the student's misbehaviour, sometimes to a greater extent than the teenagers themselves. It was evident that parents felt they had been involved in a process that was more adversarial than co-operative. Their accounts highlight a distinction between exclusion as an objective process and a subjective experience.

The parents' views are discussed in the light of current international literature and New Zealand educational policy, and their suggestions regarding possible changes to the process are put forward.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on what the families of students excluded from school think and feel about the process, and what impact their teenagers' experiences have had on them as families.

The *Guidelines for Principals and Boards of Trustees* provided by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) (2003) note that exclusion "can have far-reaching consequences for the student (and other members of their family)" (p.5). McDonald and Thomas (2003) similarly note that exclusion has ramifications beyond the school and the student. However, a significant proportion of research and writing on school exclusion focuses on policy – aims, statistics and alternative processes. Although it seems that research interest is increasing, a perspective that aims to "give a glimpse of the lives behind some of the statistics" (Munn & Lloyd, 2005, p.211) is rare. Several writers have commented that student experience is infrequently presented in discussions of exclusion (see, for example, Brown, 2007; Knipe, Reynolds, & Milner,

2007). Others remark that even less attention is paid to the experiences and opinions of families – particularly the parents and caregivers – of excluded students (Gordon, 2001; McDonald & Thomas, 2003).

This project aims to contribute to the discussion by presenting the experiences of a small group of parents (the people most intimately involved with the long-term care of the young people in question) of students excluded from schools in New Zealand, and to give voice to their thoughts, feelings, hopes and concerns.

The report acknowledges that in this study neither the students nor the school staff involved in the various situations were interviewed. The researcher is aware that these other parties will have their own potentially different, but equally valid, perspectives. The scope of this project did not, however, allow for other views to be elicited and included. The report therefore knowingly presents the views of one set of participants in a complex set of circumstances.

2. THE CONTEXT

The review of the literature establishes a context for the current project but does not claim to be a comprehensive review of all aspects of exclusion. The first section aims to give a brief overview of policy and statistical trends overseas and in New Zealand. The second section considers the broader context of school-family interaction. The third section returns to the focus on exclusion, initially considering the perceptions of students, and subsequently looking at the limited literature highlighting the experiences of the families involved.

2.1 Definitions, policy and statistics

Policies, definitions and processes concerning suspension and exclusion vary slightly between Western nations. Most of the research literature on policy and process seems to have emanated from Great Britain; interestingly and somewhat confusingly, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have different policies and procedures (BBC Action Network, 2004; Brodie & Berridge, 1996; Munn & Lloyd, 2005). Generally, processes fall into two categories: temporary suspension, and long-term or permanent 'exclusion'. The term 'exclusion' took over from 'expulsion' in the mid-1980s (Brodie & Berridge, 1996).

Different writers have described the purposes of suspension and exclusion in different ways. Partington (2001), in writing about policy in Western Australia, sees three goals: removal from the immediate environment; reduced opportunities for reinforcing negative behaviour; and a period of respite and reflection. Brown (2007), in a North American study, lists punishment, deterrent and the maintenance of safety and order. The language used by these two authors differs significantly in tone. The goals described by Brown are more punitive in nature, and similar to those described by Parsons (2005), who describes the guidelines for English schools. In contrast, in Partington's (2001) Australian report, the language has a more restorative focus, and echoes the situation in Northern Ireland as described by Knipe et al (2007), who note that there was little change in legislation in Northern Ireland through the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century. Subsequent policy changes in 2004, however, indicated an awareness of connections between school exclusion and wider social issues, and have consciously attempted to be more aware of

student opinion and experience. Despite the differences in language, Parsons (2005) makes the observation that in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia exclusion is deemed 'normal', whereas "in most other countries it would be decidedly *abnormal*, [author's italics] and unacceptably punitive to the young and dependent" (p.188).

Many writers report increasing numbers of stand-downs and exclusions through the 1980s and 1990s in the United Kingdom (Berkeley, 1999; Brodie & Berridge, 1996; Cullingford, 1999; Gordon, 2001; Lloyd, 2000), the United States (Brown, 2007) and Australia (Partington, 2001). Within this trend, it seems that rates of exclusion vary significantly between nations and also between schools. Parsons (2005) notes that in England and Wales exclusion is much more common than in Northern Ireland or Scotland. In the United Kingdom, Cullingford (1999) observes that a "small number of schools account for the majority of exclusions" (p.94).

Whether the trend for increasing rates of exclusion is continuing in the early years of the 21st century is less clear, since even the most recent writing still refers back to figures from the 1990s (eg, Brown, 2007). English reports suggest a plateauing of exclusion rates (Gordon, 2001); the factors that may contribute to this will be discussed later.

While it is possible to appeal against an exclusion decision, Berkeley (1999) reported that from 5,000 exclusions in England between 1990 and 1992, only 330 decisions were reversed, and that of 213 formal appeals, only 37 were upheld. Gordon (2001) reports an appeal rate against exclusion in England of just under 11 percent in 1997 and 1998 – more than double the 1990–92 rates – but gives no figures regarding outcome.

Similar patterns can be seen across the different countries. Boys are excluded more often than girls; Lloyd (2000) reports boys being excluded three to four times more often than girls. Minority ethnic groups, young people from disadvantaged or low socio-economic backgrounds and those in care are consistently over-represented in the statistics (Brodie & Berridge, 1996; Brown, 2007; Gordon, 2001; Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Partington, 2001). While these patterns are consistent, Brodie and Berridge (1996) advise that it is important not to think of these young people as homogeneous groups but rather to remember they are individuals from unique and complex situations.

While closely paralleling other nations, New Zealand has its own terminology and definitions as outlined by the MOE:

Stand-down means the formal removal of a student from school for a specified period. Stand-downs of a particular student can total no more than 5 school days in a term or 10 school days in a year.

Suspension means the formal removal of a student from the school until the board of trustees decides the outcome at a suspension meeting.

Exclusion means the formal removal of a student aged under 16 from the school and the requirement that the student enrol elsewhere.

Expulsion means the formal removal of a student aged 16 or over from the school. If the student wishes to continue schooling he or she may enrol elsewhere.

Exclusion and expulsion are for the most serious cases only. (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Decisions about standing down or suspending a student are made by the principal, and decisions about exclusions are made by the board of trustees.

The guidelines echo international policy that recommends exclusion as a last resort. The New Zealand Education Act (1989, 1998) outlines a threefold purpose:

(a) Provide a range of responses for cases of varying degrees of seriousness;

(b) Minimise the disruption to a student's attendance at school and facilitate the return of the student to school when that is appropriate; and

(c) Ensure that individual cases are dealt with in accordance with the principles of natural justice. (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The Ministry of Education (2003) *Guidelines for Principals* clearly set out procedures based on the principles of a child's right to free education, helping all students to realise their full potential, ensuring access to good guidance and counselling, and of taking "all reasonable steps" (p.4) to keep parents informed of students' progress – or lack thereof.

New Zealand statistics, as reported on the MOE 'Education Counts' website (*Exclusions and expulsions from school,* 2007; *Stand-downs and suspensions from school,* 2007), report an increase in stand-downs and suspensions over recent years (from 34.1 per thousand students in the year 2000 to 38.4 students per thousand in 2006), and a decrease in exclusions (from 2.7 per thousand in 2000 to 2.5 per thousand in 2006). While the MOE reports describe the exclusion numbers as a decrease, the graphic representation of the annual statistics as presented on the website appears to show fluctuations from year to year with small increases and decreases rather than a consistent trend, suggesting that there has actually been very little change over the seven years.

In terms of who is affected by decisions to stand down or exclude, New Zealand again mirrors the international picture. Māori and Pasifika are over-represented with exclusion rates of 5.6 and 4.2 per thousand respectively, compared to New Zealand European (1.3 per thousand) and Asian students (<0.5 per thousand). Students from decile 1 and 2 schools are 5.4 times more likely to be excluded than those from decile 9 and 10. Exclusion of boys is 2.5 times more common than exclusion of girls.

It is worth noting the existence of two New Zealand websites that give parents information about exclusion: the Team Up website (*Stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions,* n.d.) and *Information for parents (2003).* Both sites give definitions, an overview of the process and suggestions as to where parents might gain further information or support.

It is important to note themes that emerge from the international literature concerning views or interpretations of policies and processes. Firstly, there is agreement that policy change and greater regulation have had minimal effect on rates of exclusion (Harrison, 2004; Partington, 2001). Partington (2001) advises that suspension needs to be seen as a failure of prior behaviour management practices. He also observes that policy tends to represent a response to the immediate situation without much recognition of context.

Thinking further about the importance of context, Berkeley (1999), Cullingford (1999), Lloyd (2000) and Munn and Lloyd (2005) have commented on the importance of school ethos – that schools can be 'including' or 'excluding' in their general tone – and that this is often reflected in their suspension and formal

exclusion figures. Berkeley (1999) believes that school ethos is more significant than government policy in determining exclusion rates, and discusses different ways of conceptualising students – as scholars, as community or family or as socially deficient. A British study, recommended by the New Zealand MOE for discussion by school leaders (Muijs, et al, 2007) describes different schools' views on social inclusion, ranging from a fortress mentality that aims to exclude negative community influence, to those that saw themselves at the very heart of a community.

Extending the picture further, Munn and Lloyd (2005) and Knipe et al (2007) have linked exclusion from school with issues of wider social exclusion and isolation. Knipe et al (2007) discuss an apparent link between exclusion from school and the wider social issues of underachievement, limited employment opportunities and involvement in criminal activity.

From a different perspective, writers have commented on other influences that may affect schools' practices of suspension and exclusion. Brown (2007) has said that 'zero tolerance' policies on certain behaviours are likely to have an impact on rates of exclusion, as suspension or exclusion become a mandatory sanction for violating expected codes of behaviour. With reference to the growing use of school league tables to show academic success, Cullingford (1999) remarks that schools may use exclusion as a means of protecting their track record of academic achievement by removing students who are likely to under perform. In a similar vein, Munn and Lloyd (2005) have pointed out that academic outcomes are easier to quantify as a measure of school effectiveness than broader social achievement goals. Berkeley (1999) has postulated that schools may use exclusion as a quick-fix in difficult situations. Conversely, it has been suggested that schools may back away from adequately controlling rule-breaking because of the fear of parents initiating lawsuits (Arum, 2003). The rate of appeal against exclusion increased over the 1990s in England (Berkeley, 1999; Gordon, 2001). In Northern Ireland, the BBC has a website that explicitly informs parents how to appeal (BBC Action Network Team, 2004). Other writers believe that power in the situation lies more firmly in the hands of the school, and that courts are more likely to find in favour of the school than parents (Brown, 2007) – a view supported by Berkeley's (1999) figures.

Berkeley (1999) believes that schools' reactions to situations are not predictable and that there can be a range of responses within one school to students exhibiting similar behaviour. It is also possible that schools may act on the fringes of policy and process. Lloyd's (2000) study found that in Scotland significant numbers of students were sent home informally for prolonged periods – a practice not falling within the legal guidelines.

Brown (2007) found that it was common in the United States for students to be out of education for prolonged periods, again despite policy that expects continuous schooling. Linking a previous observation on long-term outcomes to these periods of time away from school, studies have indicated that quantity of time in school instruction is linked to long-term employment (*Exclusions and expulsions from school,* 2007).

It is worth noting that this review has already highlighted, albeit implicitly, one of the recurring tensions in discussions of exclusion – the contrast between policy language that emphasises punishment or rehabilitation. In this latter section, issues of legal process and issues of social inclusion sit alongside one another – a tension that consistently appears in the literature (Parsons, 2005).

2.2 School and family – the bigger picture

Exclusion from school needs to be seen as part of a bigger picture (Munn & Lloyd, 2005), and the end-point of a long sequence of events (Cullingford, 1999). Consequently, this section will consider briefly the wider picture of school-family dynamics, focusing on three points.

Firstly, several writers have described connections between family circumstances and school achievement. Goebert et al (2004), in the introduction to their Hawaiian study, state that "studies have consistently shown that strong families promote positive school-related outcomes among youth" (p.194). This point is echoed by Van Hoose and Legrand (2000), who see a positive home environment contributing to both academic success and constructive attitudes towards school.

Conversely, the literature indicates that teenagers who are excluded from school are more likely to come from home environments where there are socio-emotional

or financial problems, and homes where there is less parental supervision (Stanley, Canham & Cureton, 2006). These writers observe that increased family stress leads to increased vulnerability in a young person, and consequently to an increased likelihood of 'acting out' at school. As Cullingford (1999) observes, disaffection is a gradual process and once authority is questioned and a sense of power experienced, be it at home or school, the consequences flow from one setting to the other.

The second point is a consideration of the ways in which schools think about themselves and the families from which their students come. Two reports challenge schools to be careful about their conceptualising of the different parties involved and to be aware of the risk of problematising parents. Firstly, a United Kingdom study (Tett, 2001) states that "a child's successful schooling *should* depend upon a great deal more than the efficacy of any individual parent" (p.193). Tett (2001) warns that it is too easy for schools to put the blame on parents if education appears unsuccessful. She also comments on the tendency of schools to pathologise parents who challenge or disagree with a school's decision, and to define a 'good parent' as one who conforms to school expectations. Secondly, Harrison (2004), in a
New Zealand-based discussion, states:

> The importance of family background in influencing student performance has been twisted by some New Zealand education academics into a reason for excusing poor performance by some schools because the students attending them are from disadvantaged backgrounds or members of a minority group (p.9).

Harrison (2004) adds that parents do not always make perfect decisions but that overall they tend to make better decisions than distant professionals when it comes to the welfare of their children. He also believes that there is little evidence that economically disadvantaged parents make poor choices in issues of schooling. Dyson and Robson (*Links between school, family and the community: A review of the evidence,* 1999) found evidence of a strong desire on the part of most parents to be proactively involved in supporting school activities and decision-making.

The third piece of this section is a discussion of collaborative action between schools and families. Much work has been done that shows the academic and social benefits of collaboration between parents

and school staff (see, for example, the Harvard Family Research Project website). Various reports from both the United Kingdom (*Inter-agency working to prevent school exclusion,* 2001; Milbourne, 2005; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003) and the United States (Van Hoose & Legrand, 2000) describe programmes targeted at disadvantaged communities, and communities in which school exclusion has been a problem. Features that contributed to the generally positive outcomes were the presence in a school of people who could provide independent support, such as social workers; the ability of parents to negotiate roles rather than have expectations and processes imposed on them; the involvement of people who genuinely cared; and processes that were flexible, equitable and non-judgemental. Of particular relevance to this study is a statement by Vulliamy and Webb (2003):

> ...an emphasis upon the subjective experiences of key participants is warranted in order to counter criticisms … that the evaluations of many projects addressing social exclusion are only concerned with measurable outcomes and fail to document the views and changing attitudes of those involved which are vital to eventual and sustainable success (p.276).

While these programmes are reported as having positive outcomes in terms of lowering exclusion rates, they are clearly not without their challenges. Lloyd et al (*Inter-agency working to prevent school exclusion,* 2001) observe that young people and their parents often found meetings associated with addressing disciplinary issues difficult even when the environment was constructive. Milbourne (2005) makes the point that programmes that focus on the needs of a family can have the effect of reinforcing the sense of blame – that problems at school imply deficits at home. However, despite the challenges, there would seem to be encouraging evidence for collaborative strategies. Vulliamy and Webb (2003) report that the inclusion of social workers in secondary schools significantly improved communication and the development of joint strategies, as a result of their independence from the school system, their availability and accessibility and their ability to monitor due process.

2.3 Experiences of exclusion

This final section of the literature review focuses on those on the receiving end of school exclusion. Firstly,

attention is given to the students themselves and, subsequently, the main focus of this project, their families.

The literature notes that little research has been carried out into student experience of exclusion (Brown, 2007) and that students' voices are infrequently heard in discussion of the issue (Knipe et al, 2007). Brown (2007) goes on to say, "effectively addressing these issues requires an understanding of what actually happens to students in the wake of school exclusion, some of which can only be learned from the young people themselves" (p.434).

The sentiment is echoed by Gordon (2001), who observes that "nobody seems to be asking them [the disaffected young people], the most important participants in the school exclusion policy debate. Perhaps we should ask the right questions and listen to the children's voices before imposing adult solutions" (p.83).

While Munn and Lloyd (2005) also say that student voices can be an important contribution to any critique of school policy and process, they go on to say that the reason why those voices might be useful in critiquing may be the very reason that we choose not to listen to them, in that their views are often critical of the process to which they have been subjected.

Knipe et al (2007) interviewed 114 students aged 11–16 from different schools in Northern Ireland (they were students from the general school population, not just excluded students). This research project reflects the Northern Ireland Department of Education's policy of paying more attention to student opinion. The authors' conclusion was that the young people involved gave thoughtful responses and contributed a valid voice to the issues. The article gives a very detailed report of the students' views on a range of questions; they would be hard to summarise adequately. However, it was clear that the students varied in their views (for example, they differed over the extent to which they thought parents should be involved in decision-making), and that the responses were not all student-centred (for example, they were clear that suspension should not be viewed as a holiday, and that schools had a responsibility to supply schoolwork). Of particular interest was the view that an independent person as part of the process could be useful in seeing that there was 'fair play'.

This review found three research reports that specifically looked at the experiences and perspectives of excluded students – one from Australia (Partington, 2001), one from England (Gordon, 2001) and one from Scotland (Munn & Lloyd, 2005).

Whilst it would be difficult to do justice to the young people in the reports by giving a brief summary, there do seem to be some consistent themes across the studies:

> a sense that exclusion from school is a powerful form of rejection of the young person

> a sense of responsibility ("I asked for it") and regret

> an awareness that exclusion from school resulted in getting into trouble in other situations, such as petty crime

> an awareness that students sometimes deliberately provoke exclusion as a means of getting out of a situation they were unhappy with

> a desire to be treated as individuals and with respect, and to have teachers understand their home environments and challenges

> a sense that at times teachers and the system are unfair and inconsistent.

In discussing the impact of exclusion on students, Brown (2007) makes three observations: firstly, more needs to be known about the effects of exclusion on young people; secondly, that better ways of supporting students who are not in school are needed; and thirdly, while student attitudes and issues clearly exist before exclusion, exclusion appears to exacerbate rather than alleviate them.

Having considered the general context for both school exclusion and school-family interaction, and the experiences and perspectives of students, this review moves to consider the focus of this project – the voices of the families involved. The literature contains both 'anecdotal' accounts (A parent's story, 2002) and larger research studies (Brodie & Berridge, 1996; Gordon, 2001; McDonald & Thomas, 2003; Partington, 2001), but as a proportion of the total literature on exclusion, this perspective is clearly in the minority. Apart from one Australian study (Partington, 2001), the remainder are from the United Kingdom. It would also appear that

mothers' voices are more common in the studies than those of fathers, and the reasons for this are not clear.

McDonald and Thomas's (2003) study is an article reporting on one facet of a doctoral study. They describe the parents' stories as "passionate, painful and poignant" (p.108), which would seem an appropriate summation not just of their study, but also of the other reports referred to above. McDonald and Thomas (2003) report the views of eight parents who were interviewed as one part of a broader project. They remark that the parents' views on exclusion reflected views on schooling in general, and communicated a sense of anger and powerlessness. They say that the interviews "offer a picture of a group of parents clearly traumatised by the experience of their children's exclusion" (p.111).

Alongside, and contributing to the emotions expressed, were concerns that timeframes for decision-making were lacking, and that little attention was paid to the present or future educational needs of their children, several of whom spent long periods out of school. Several of the parents in the study said that they felt they had no voice in the process, and were "made to feel like you're some sort of unfit parent" (p.114).

Parents in the studies by Brodie and Berridge (1996) and Partington (2001) report similar experiences. Brodie and Berridge (1996) report case studies of 30 pupils, in which 12 families were interviewed. These writers observe that some of the schools involved had not followed correct process, and that schools appeared to be using exclusion as a routine sanction, rather than a last resort.

One theme that emerges from both the above reports, and which is also highlighted by Gordon (2001) and Vulliamy and Webb (2003), is that parents are not blind to the behaviours of their children, and struggle with managing the behaviours as much as, if not more than, the school.

> A mother recounted how on the one hand she appreciated the considerable problems that her son was presenting at school because she was unable to control his behaviour at home, but on the other hand she felt worn down by the constant criticism of him by staff (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003, p.281).

Another thread that seems consistent across the reports is the sense that parents feel labelled and treated in the same way as they feel their children are labelled and treated – bad student, bad parent.

The consequence is that parents "can feel not only confused but actually humiliated, and in turn feel themselves to be psychologically excluded from the school system" (Cullingford, 1999, p.58). Cullingford (1999) goes on to observe that if pupils see their parents humiliated and poorly handled by school staff, this simply serves to further harden their own attitude to the school.

Another factor in this discussion is the concern of a parent with protecting their teenager from the possibility of being 'labelled' for the future. This is illustrated in the personal account of a mother:

> When asked to speak at a forum on suspension/expulsion, my response was that Susan was neither suspended or excluded but that I removed her because I was afraid she was about to be and I didn't want that catastrophe for her. I was told this was a much more common scenario than either suspension or expulsion (A parent's story, 2002, p.39).

'Susan's mother' also observes that being told they were not wanted at school was "rejection at a very vulnerable time", and that the student is often left with no way to make amends.

Partington's (2001) Australian study interviewed 15 suspended Year 10 students from two schools, together with their parents and teachers. One of the schools was in a lower socio-economic area than the other. Similar themes to those previously mentioned emerge – the parents' sense of powerlessness, concerns over schools not following policy and schools' seeming unwillingness to take the home context into consideration. "Few of the parents thought suspensions were desirable. Although one school principal considered that this was because it disrupted their work as they had to remain home to care for their child, this was not a major concern for most parents" (Partington, 2001, p.323). The view of the principal mentioned seems to be shared by others – the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was reported in the press as proposing that "parents of pupils suspended from school should be made to stay at home and supervise them"

(*Parents of suspended pupils should stay at home says Blair,* 2005).

Partington (2001) also observed that parents who had previously had regular positive contact with the school generally felt better about the process than those who had not, and that the responses of parents from the school in the lower socio-economic area seemed more resigned than those of parents from the other school.

This review has sought to set the scene and to give specific attention to the experiences of students and their families. The literature conveys an impression that exclusion is ineffective in achieving either remediation or effective punishment, and such studies as exist suggest that parents find the process difficult and destructive. Interestingly, there seems to be little research data reporting longer-term outcomes of exclusion.

Partington (2001) helpfully summarises much of what has been covered in his observation that, while the

students involved may not be angels, nevertheless "they deserve a 'fair go'" (p.15).

The literature suggests that the students and their families with the least resources are those who experience the greatest sense of injustice.

Two quotes from the literature serve as the conclusion to this review:

> The socially estranged have had all the experiences that explain why they have ended up where they are. But it need not have been like that. What looks with hindsight as inevitable is also clearly preventable (Cullingford, 1999, p.173).

> Exclusion from school is a matter of attitudes: our attitudes to our children who misbehave, our attitudes to the staff and schools who try to cater for their needs, our attitudes to the parents of such children, our attitude to how we think they should be treated (Parffrey, cited in Gordon, 2001, p.77).

3. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

3.1 Theoretical perspectives

A project which aims to provide "a glimpse of the lives behind some of the statistics" (Munn & Lloyd, 2005, p.211) lends itself, methodologically, to a phenomenological approach. In contemporary research, "in its broadest meaning, phenomenology is a theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p.23). Rooted in the work of Husserl, with subsequent development from writers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenological approach is concerned primarily with seeking to see as others see, and to understand the meaning that others make of their experience, rather than overlaying the interpretations of the researcher (Kvale, 1996).

In their discussion of interpretation and representation of life-history work (one member of the phenomenological family), Cole and Knowles (2001) use the analogy of an art gallery and "see the role of researcher in interpretation as similar to that of a curator" (p.115). This seems a useful, although admittedly limited, framework to scaffold any discussion of the complexities of phenomenological approaches. A scene or an object exists, which the artist represents in her or his chosen form. In terms of the analogy, the data-collection phase of research could be paralleled with the act of creating an artistic representation of a scene. Consideration of this phase would suggest that the work produced is actually a co-creation of participant and researcher. The researcher then changes role to that of curator in taking the picture and seeking to display it in such a way as to make an impact on the viewer (reader).

The subject matter (or the scene) is the lived experience of the participants. Human relationships are inherently complex, and any research involving people is challenging. Qualitative approaches may be critiqued as inherently limited or biased, but research projects attempting to quantify relational dynamics create highly complex analytical tools with outcomes that do not appear any less partial. In CS Lewis's 1945 novel *That Hideous Strength*, one of the characters states, "I happen to believe that you can't study men; you can only get to know them, which is quite a different thing" (p.69) – an eminently appropriate observation from a phenomenological standpoint.

Whilst lived experience is the 'raw material' being worked with, it has already been processed to some degree by the interviewee (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Participants invited to describe experience are recounting incomplete memories and subjective perceptions rather than objective reality. The opening lines of the movie *Great Expectations* (Linson, 1997) accurately portray this:

> What colour it may be in memory depends on the day. I am not going to tell the story the way it happened. I am going to tell it the way I remember it.

It seems possible that the research process (in this instance an interview) itself may be a catalyst to provoke the making of meaning from previously uninterpreted experience, or at least in bringing subconscious meaning to awareness (Kvale, 1996). Bryman (2001) points out that interviewers ask participants to reflect on their perceptions of not just an event but also what went on around that event, thereby gaining a more longitudinal view. The interview, while admittedly a snapshot, is not simply a 'still' of events but an opportunity to draw together an interviewee's experiences, interpretations and insights (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Barone (1992) describes Ecker's five phases of qualitative problem-solving, moving from phase one – the confronting of raw phenomena – to phase five, the completion of the total work. The phases move through a process of identifying themes and sub-themes, pulling out major threads and choosing to omit material not central to the emergent key strands. In this project, the process of analysing interview transcripts has followed these same lines. In keeping with Gadamer's (as cited in Sharkey, 2001) caution regarding reliance on pre-set standardised methods of interpretation, no formal analytical tool was used. Rather, reading and re-reading interview transcripts served to highlight comments on experience and insight into the major themes.

3.2 The participants

In the initial explorations concerning the feasibility of the project, responses to the idea were sought from two senior teachers from different schools on separate occasions. Their reaction was identical – that the project sounded interesting, but that they did not think their schools would want to be used as 'doorways' for finding participants.

Instead, an alternative education provider (from here referred to as AEP) was approached. The positive response from the director resulted in the AEP becoming the source of the participants. The AEP, at the time of writing, has between 15 and 20 young people on its roll, who had ended up there after experiences in a number of secondary schools. This proved advantageous to the project, since while a qualitative approach cannot legitimately generalise from its findings, it was nevertheless possible to hear accounts of experiences at more than one school without the 'leg work' associated with working with multiple schools. It also meant that the identity of the schools concerned, or of any individual staff, did not need to be known.

The proposed research method, including the participant letter, was submitted to the researcher's institutional research ethics committee and approval was gained. The participant letter, written by the researcher, was sent by the director to the caregivers of the students on the AEP roll. The letter was followed up with a phone call, with the aim of acquiring eight caregivers willing to be interviewed. This target was easily achieved – all those approached appeared enthusiastic about being involved. The eight interviews were conducted by the researcher, and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were sent back to the interviewee for checking and comment. The interviews used a semi-structured format, built around the questions that had been included in the letter to participants:

> What were the events and timeframes around your child's exclusion? (the reasons for exclusion are not relevant to the study)

> How did the suspension affect your family – how did you feel about what was happening – what were the practical consequences for the way your family runs?

> Were there support agencies involved with you as a family before the suspension – if so, did their role change as the situation developed?

> Were new supports put in place for you – if so, how did you know about and access them?

> As you reflect on what happened, how would you describe your sense of being involved, of being able to contribute to the process?

> Do you have any suggestions for running the process in ways which would have been more helpful for you as a family?

These questions were used as discussion-starters and the conversations were allowed to unfold, clarifying and developing responses as they emerged.

The interviews were arranged at times convenient to the participants, happening in random order as a result. All interviews were conducted within a two-week period. The interviewees comprised:

> four natural mothers, who have partners (one of whom was part of the interview)

> one step-mother, whose partner is the natural father and who was intending to be part of the interview but who was called back to work at the last minute

> two natural mothers, who are solo parents

> one natural father, who is a solo parent.

The young people concerned were five girls and three boys, all 14 or 15 at the time their parents were interviewed, who had come from four different schools to AEP.

In the report the parents have been given pseudonyms; their children are referred to by their relationship to the parent ('my daughter' or 'his son', for example). All other names of people or schools have been omitted. For the sake of protecting the anonymity of the families concerned every effort has been made to disguise potential identifying background information or events. It should be noted, however, that many of these families were dealing with significant situations – for example, historical abuse, suicide in the family, major geographical relocation, parental relationship breakdown – which the young people involved were having to deal with, and which contributed to stress at home.

4. THE INTERVIEWS

This section presents a cameo of each participant's interview. The cameo summarises what the participant said, without interpretation or discussion. Presenting interview material in summarised format is challenging, and open to the imposition of subjectivity. Care has been taken to be as faithful to the interview transcripts as possible in presenting these cameos. While themes from the interviews form the basis of the discussion that follows, these summaries are presented for the reader to take what she or he will from them, independently of what has been taken from them into the discussion. Once written, each cameo was sent back to the participant for their endorsement. The participants are presented in the order in which they were interviewed.

As mentioned in the introduction, the report is presented with the awareness that only one perspective of each scenario is being given. However, the fact that others may remember the situation in a different way does not invalidate the experiences and memories of the parents involved.

4.1 Michelle

Michelle and her partner are both, under normal circumstances, employed full-time. At the time of the interview Michelle had a daughter in her early teens, and also a younger son.

Michelle's daughter had had some difficulties with schooling, and had attended a number of primary schools. Support for Michelle's daughter and the family had varied at the different schools.

Michelle described the lengths to which she had gone to make things work for her daughter at secondary school:

> I made it very clear to them that this was not your average, everyday student – this particular student was going to need lots of … I've been through this a thousand times with schools, I know how she functions, I know how she works.

Michelle related the story of what happened:

> [During term, she] … was excluded … the timeframe from when it all sort of started until it all sort of ended, where she ended up somewhere else was around about three months.

It's the first time it's got to exclusion, but in the past she has been given the opportunity to leave, rather than be excluded or has had the opportunity to perhaps get help from services to be able to stay in school.

> I would like to say that I was shocked and not happy with the process at all – and if it hadn't have been for me doing enquiries and just spending a lot of time asking questions and making lots of phone calls, I probably wouldn't have known my rights and been able to go through the process…

Michelle described an incident where her daughter was the victim, and subsequently:

> …then throughout the [year] … there was obviously behavioural issues and things going on, and then all of a sudden, just bang, I get a phone call to say that she has been stood down for three days, that then turned into about three weeks…

> That three days – at the end of the third day, I got a phone call to say that she wasn't welcome back at the school and she would have to attend a board meeting and she was to be back at the school at a particular date, in uniform and that she was going up against the board to see if it would be all right for her to be allowed back into the school or not.

> We went to that board meeting ... and at that board meeting I wanted to make it very clear that not all children are clean cut, that a lot of children have got other issues that go on that affect their schooling and that needs to be taken into consideration, like perhaps mental health or abuse or whatever it might be ... that I felt that it was the school's responsibility to perhaps bring in services to help keep her at school and also to help maintain the other issues that were going on for her at school, and obviously those services would obviously help at home as well.

> At that board meeting, they couldn't make a decision right then and there, and they said that she would have to be stood down until they had made a decision, and they had written me a letter with a date that she was going to be allowed to go back to school, and in that letter there were things that we had to do before she was allowed to go back to school. One was that she had to ... [refer to a health service] ... and they gave us a period

of – I don't know – I think it was three weeks – and they said, we will consider bringing her back into the school after three weeks as long as she has done this, this, this and this ... so then I wondered how she was going to learn in that three weeks, I wondered who was going to look after her ... [because of employment responsibilities]... I rung the school to find out who was going to teach her in that three weeks and the response was, 'That's not our responsibility, you need to find some work for her, you need to teach her at home, you need to home-school her, until she is allowed back into the school, which she may not even be allowed back into the school, but, if you do this, this, this and this' ... I would have thought that the school would have organised the appointment with [the health service], so I made the appointment myself, we attended [the health service] which she did not respond to very well and then the report that went back to the school was not helpful at all.

The school didn't get in contact with any of the services that they said they would, the school didn't do anything, the school didn't even drop off work for her to do at home... I looked into that and found out that, after speaking to someone from the Ministry that it is the school's responsibility, so I rung the school, told them it was their responsibility, and by the end of the three weeks – the last day of the third week was when the school said, 'There's some work here at reception, you've got to come and pick it up.'

By that stage I was ropeable and didn't pick it up because it was three weeks and I'd had to have three weeks off work ... the three weeks turned into six weeks and that's when I had rung [AEP] to find out if she could go there until she was taken back into mainstream ... because I was worried about her not learning in that time ... she had missed out on all that schooling for quite a long time... I remember it being nearly a whole term... I'd rung a lot of different people to help me out, people from different services and Youth Aid officers, the police and lots of different people to find out where she could go ... the school never told me there were places like the [community organisation] that she could go to, to learn during the day – they never told me that she could attend a programme with the police...

The way I perceived it, as far as I was concerned, they wanted her out and they weren't prepared to do anything to help keep her in the school... Anyway, we got a letter from the board, or from the school saying that the board was meeting and they were going to be making their decision and they would call me that night with their decision.

I rung the school and said, 'Why am I not invited to that meeting?' and they said, 'It's not necessary for you to be there and we will make the decision without you and we will ring and let you know because we know about your circumstances' and I said, 'No, I want to go through the original letter and see what the school has done and if the school has done anything about what they said they were going to do and it's my right to be there'...

The only reason I found out that it is my right to be there at that board meeting, was because I was told by people I had contacted ... we went to this board meeting ... and it was very uncomfortable, I got really upset ... it was very clear to me before I even walked into that room from discussing some of the stuff with the [staff member], who was dealing with her, I knew straight away that they weren't going to have her back into the school...

Michelle's daughter expressed to the board that she was sorry and wanted to return to mainstream education. The school promptly advised Michelle that her daughter was not welcome back at the school and that they would be communicating with other schools in the area to see if another school would take her. The school noted negative things about Michelle's daughter in this communication:

...so obviously no one is going to take her, are they? I managed to get some really good help from the Ministry. I rung the Ministry of Education straight away, and said, 'Look, what am I going to do, this is what has happened, this is how it has been handled.' I can't remember who I spoke to, she was just horrified at the way that things have gone and it was just a big mess and I felt that the principal of the school didn't really realise it was going to go that way and I think she really felt that it was the wrong decision to exclude her on ... [the basis of this incident] ... every time I asked a question, the [school staff member] would shut me down and make it look like I was the one that was in the wrong

...they made you feel like, 'Look after your children properly.'

Michelle felt that some board members 'played the pity game' although one member commented that her daughter was a 'lost cause'. They expressed that the school could not do anything more for her daughter:

> Whereas I don't believe in that, I have in the past worked with schools who have had lots of different services and agencies work with a particular student and come up with one action plan and provide perfect outcomes for that child.

> I had [a school staff member] ring me and apologise because [this person] was so embarrassed with the way the school handled things and was really upset with the outcome and had wished for a better outcome and [this school staff member] actually came out the house to see if my daughter was all right – which was nice...

From the way she talked about the information and the support that she had received, it was clear that Michelle felt that she had been the one to take all the initiative. She acknowledged the help given by her partner's extended family. When asked if she had been aware of the Ministry website that gives information to parents, she said she had not seen it.

Michelle described the impact on the family as significant:

> I had to have all that time off work, even now ... I still haven't been able to get back on track with my job.

> In the past I've always been a solo mother and the schools have made me feel a lot like, 'Oh well, you know it's because she comes from a one-parent home that things have got this out of hand.' They were sort of going down that path with me until ... and it was nothing to do with that, it was all to do with history. Sometimes they do make you feel inadequate, but this particular school, I felt like they had just given up, there was nothing you could do or say that would make them change their minds.

> I'm still trying to do as much work as I possibly could, which I wasn't able to function 100 percent and concentrate 100 percent – so that has caused an effect on my job, financially it's had a huge effect on us, on my relationship because he is not the father to these children, so he's taken on a big

enough job, let alone having to support us and having to deal with all the stress and the behaviour that she exhibits, so the relationship was a bit sort of rocky there ... [another child in the family] was completely and totally affected, he is very sensitive, he is the complete opposite to my daughter, he was very nervous all the time and worried that he was going to say or do something wrong to add to the stress – he was very quiet – and he missed out on a lot of opportunity – I like to go to school camps and do the school visits and school days and things, I always make an effort to do that – I couldn't attend a lot of his needs.

> It was a crazy, crazy time, and even now, even now my job is, still isn't how it used to be ... [because of lost income and opportunities] ... people couldn't rely on me to turn up because, just randomly, I'd have to say, 'Look sorry, I can't make it' and so that wasn't very good.

Michelle mentioned that the current relationship between her and her daughter was difficult:

> I think I'm only just hanging in there with her because I know that eventually she'll see that I was always the one that was there for her and I was always the one that tried to do the things.

Michelle was asked what she thought would have made a difference to her experience – what would have helped?

> I think there should be an information pack that goes out to all parents ... about how if anything happens, what they can do, who they can turn to.

> ...it's not just about being a child that wants to be naughty in class, there is always something going on in the background – it's the same with the bullies, you only bully because something is happening – I think that there needs to be this whole, having all the services that can be involved work together and come up with one action plan and I think that if there was someone in the schools doing that, talking with parents, the student and perhaps bringing in services that would assist with that student and how to keep that student in school, coming up with one plan.

> ...definitely information, because there are a lot of parents out there who have got no idea about how the education system works – and your rights.

Michelle talked about a parent's responsibility to be concerned, honest and involved:

> I think the parents have a lot to answer for – I think parents don't have enough responsibility when it comes to school – am I just contradicting myself now? Like I say, you've got to be a bit proactive, you've got to go in there and – let's say you've got a teenager who smokes marijuana – the parents know about it, the parents allow it to happen at home because they've got no control over this child, the parents probably do it anyway ... at school, you know, the parents should be a bit more open and honest about what's going on, if they really want to help that child – they need to be completely honest about what's going on, I think.

4.2 Linda

Linda, her partner and their blended family, used to live in another part of New Zealand but because of her daughter's increasing involvement with 'the wrong kind of people' they sold up and moved to their current home, 'to give her a fresh start'. Linda's daughter started having problems at secondary school:

> We didn't get any feedback from the school to say things aren't going well, this child is still [subject] to peer pressure – nothing! Until she had done things wrong and then they contacted us – 'We've got a problem.' [A staff member] of the school said to me in a meeting, 'Well, it's not the school's fault because we don't ask for these imports to come to our school' – and I said, 'So you're referring to us as imports', and he said, 'Yes, and many more' – and I thought, 'What a cheek!'

> When the going got tough, she moved ... to live with her father and he sent her to school up there – now he said that she had similar problems up there, but not as severe, because the school dealt with it up there ... she had like a three-day stand-down and her father took her to work with him for that three days.

> ... she came back to me and that's when the school wouldn't have anything to do with her.

Linda's daughter returned to live with her mother, and Linda attempted to get her back into the school. However, the school did not want her to return, stating that it would not be in her best interests to be there.

Linda was clearly upset that the school did not offer any alternatives, or support, or school work. She reported that all communication with the school was by phone:

> All by phone calls and I know the lady that I spoke to and the receptionist and they said – pretty much, 'Oh, it's you again' – and I said I need to speak to ... and they'd say, 'No, [this staff member] is in a meeting right now, I'm sorry, [school staff member] is taking a class right now.' 'When will [this staff member] be out of the meeting because I'll ring right back' – and I rang back and I did speak to [this staff member] but it was chase, chase, chase the whole time. And I said to [this staff member], 'Would you write me a letter explaining ... when I go to these people for help, this letter is to back me up to say, Yes, I know this child, yes she has problems, blah, blah, blah' and [this staff member] said, 'I don't have time to write you a letter but I am here and you can give my name and phone number and they can ring me and I will tell them everything they need to know about your child ... if you permit that.'

After seeking advice from her mother, Linda rang the 'education department':

> I think it was in the phone book – under the government departments – it was an 0800 number ... and explained the situation ... they wanted to know what schools she had attended and then they told me where I stood – legally, where I stood, and said that unless she had been expelled and stuff, there was no legal grounds for them not to accept her.

Linda felt frustrated by what she perceived as a lack of support. She appealed to her GP, who recommended services including some health services. This contact led to Linda hearing about the AEP, which her daughter subsequently began attending.

The impact on the family of Linda's daughter's struggles with life in general and with schooling in particular has been significant:

> She's stuck at home with me all day ... she got frustrated herself, started getting into bad-behavioural-type things.

Others family members have experienced the stress in differing ways:

Personally it's affected me by draining – it's drained me – well, I won't blame her, but not knowing any way to turn has caused – I mean it did ... [lead to medical issues associated with stress].

This led to loss of employment and significant loss of income. Linda also reported severe effects on the health and well being of the children in the family, as well as her partner, and a fear of the family being broken up.

Linda spoke very highly of the AEP, in terms of how her daughter was getting on both academically and socially, and also of their support for the family:

They've organised family counselling, individual counselling, the whole lot, they've just done more for us than anyone ever has.

When asked for suggestions as to how a school might respond to a situation such as her daughter's, Linda said:

Well I think, for one, they could meet with the parents of the difficult child – explain that, you know, this is a difficult situation, tell the families about the alternative educations that are out there ... tell them where they can go for counselling, tell them where they can go for other kids that might need help because of this ... they need someone at the school that is going to stand up and say, 'We are here to help you parents with these difficult kids.'

Linda also had some clear views on discipline:

I said to [her teacher], 'Okay, she skipped school on Monday, why don't you get her in on the weekend to clean the school as a punishment, for not turning up ... get her in on the weekend picking up rubbish – I'll sign a letter saying that she can do it as a bloomin' punishment for this kid.' 'Oh no, we're not allowed to enforce that sort of thing.' Well, for God's sake, you're not allowed to smack, you're not allowed to enforce disciplinary action, it's just not heard of – it's just like, go figure! That's why these kids are just doing whatever the hell they like, when they like – because there is no consequences.

4.3 Terri

Terri is a solo mum with three sons, two of whom live with her. Her oldest son currently lives with his father, Terri's ex-husband.

She described her middle son's school experience:

He started off at primary where he was fine, then he went to intermediate and it sort of went downhill a bit from intermediate, he played up a little bit but it wasn't too bad. Then when he went into mainstream college, that's when it all started going wrong. He's always been a class clown ... you know, playing around and stuff like that, but he started having little fights and that sort of stuff and it took probably just, like, a year that he was at normal school before he got excluded.

When he left the mainstream school he went to one alternative education school for approximately one year, before transferring to the AEP in 2008:

I love [AEP], they're just great and he really enjoys it, he comes home happy and in a really good mood and tells me about what he's been up to and all that, and that never happened [before], he never really wanted to talk about it, so I think he's settling great now, I'm really happy... I think they're a lot more understanding and they don't take no crap.

Terri described the process that led up to her son leaving the mainstream school:

It took a while for the school to get in contact with me about what he was getting up to; I always thought that they got in contact with you ... you know ... kids playing up and getting detentions and all that sort of stuff, that they'd phone me and you know, call a meeting, and everything ... and that didn't really happen, it was only, you know ... he was getting in trouble apparently at school, I said to him every day, 'How was school?' and he'd say, 'Sweet as' – you know – I thought everything was fine, but then when I got to go into the school, this had been going on for a couple of months and ... I didn't know anything about it.

It was, you know, like I said to the [senior staff member], 'You should have got in contact with me and maybe we could have started doing something about it at the beginning of it and stuff instead of leaving it so long' ... I don't really know, you know, but it just seems that we went for the teacher interview ... and he got stood down for a couple of weeks and then he went back to school, but he didn't get on when he was at school so he got pulled in again and then that's when [alternative

education] came up and then, yeah, he was just basically taken out from then.

Terri was asked if the school had gone through a formal exclusion process:

> Yeah, yeah – he never went up before the board though or anything – because the way that ... I don't know if all schools do, but the way that [school] do – he's still enrolled at [school] even though he's going to [AEP].

Interviewer: So how did that work out? He was stood down for a couple of weeks.

Terri: Stood down. He went back for about three or four days – then we got called back in again – that's when they said he's not getting on at school, so shall we try [AEP]?

Interviewer: Okay – so who set that up?

Terri: That was the deputy principal – and then we had to go to [other school] because I believe the principal [there] runs the [alternative education] ... so we had to go there and have a meeting with them.

> ...because [my son] didn't have no fear at school, there was no real punishment ... he's going to get kicked out of school – well to be honest, that's not really a threat to any kid, especially being stood down – I mean, I do take the TV and the X-box and stuff away from them when they get stood down, but they still prefer to be home than to be at school ... I do think that they could have done a few more things before they actually excluded him from the school.

Interviewer: So what I'm hearing is that the school didn't go through a formal exclusion process?

Terri: No...

Interviewer: But the end result was you feel like [your son] was excluded from the school...

Terri: Yeah, yeah, definitely – and mainly because ...they just couldn't deal with [my son] – like I say, I was bad at school and stuff but I still came every day and I was never excluded – if we'd had the same rules back over in [home country] like they have here, there would be no kids left to go to the bloody schools ... [laughter] ... they'd all be excluded!

Terri felt she had been unable to discuss her son's difficulties with the school:

> No, not really – I feel really intimidated at schools, I always have done, I feel like – they probably don't even realise, but you feel like you're getting spoken down to by the principal and the deputy principal, because you don't know the runnings of the school and stuff, and they're basically telling you and it's, like ... you just go along with it.

This was the second experience for Terri:

> It was worse for [my older son] – he got excluded from intermediate – so I had to home-school him for the two years for intermediate school because he got excluded more or less straight away for fighting and ... my marriage had just split up as well, so that's probably where that all stemmed from... He went to [secondary school] after he'd done his home-school for two years – but obviously didn't fit in after he'd been home-schooled for two years – so yeah, he got put straight into [alternative education] and that was more or less straight away – it was within a couple of weeks of the term starting.

> ...there wasn't really that much discussion with the school over it ... it was just a meeting and that's what they decided was going to happen... 'If he doesn't do this, then he'll be excluded and you'll have to home-school him', and that was my biggest fear, was having him home-schooled again.

> I just didn't agree with the way they were over [him] because it was all so quick and no discussion.

Interviewer: So the process that intermediate went through to put him out of the school, how did that go?

Terri: He got stood down first because ... him and his friends got caught with tinnies, dealing drugs and ... so, I don't blame them for kicking him out of the school ... but the two boys that he was with, they didn't get expelled – only my son that got expelled, the other two got stood down for two weeks – but [my son] actually got expelled – I don't understand why.

The support Terri had managed to obtain had come from her initiative. When her older son was having difficulties she sought counselling to help them through the time of her marriage break-up. She remarked that she felt let down by the intermediate

school for their lack of understanding and support at that time:

> I just don't think that there has ever been real family support, it's like ... you get told that your child's been naughty at school and they're not fitting in with school and there's alternative education and they can go to that, but it's not really a decision of yours – like, for me – you really just have to go along with it ... because you want your kid to have some sort of education, so you just, yeah, go along with what they're saying ... and agree with what they say because you don't know any different, there's no one to give you advice over it or anything.

Asked, on the basis of her own experience, where she would advise another parent to seek help, Terri replied:

> I think I'd probably say go and see Legal Aid now.

> You're just really dumb to it and there's nobody out there that you can ask – if you ask the education authority or the people who are trying to tell you what you are meant to be doing, they are just all like, 'Well, this is how it is' – there's no alternative, so it's like well, 'What happens if that doesn't work out?' and they're like, 'Well if that don't work out, he'll be excluded' and then it's down to you ... and you're like well, 'Isn't he meant to be educated?', and they're like, 'No, no, no – if we can't educate him then he's out', that's the impression that I get ... and to be honest, if someone asked me – if you've got money, go and see a lawyer and see what your legal rights are and what are the rights of your kids because you don't actually know what the education authority can do and what the school can do.

Terri talked about the impact on the family as she saw it:

> Not so badly with [my middle son] – more badly with [my oldest son] ... [my middle son] had the attitude why should he go to school – because [my oldest son] wasn't going to school – the little one won't say that because he loves school.

> ...I think that really and truly it kicked off for [my middle son] because he saw what happened with [his brother] – and like, how easy it was to actually get out of the system and be able to do what the bloody hell you want.

> ...financially, because they eat you out of house and home when they're home with you all the time, so that was quite a financial thing, and like, because

I couldn't work – luckily, unluckily I had an injury at work, so I've been off work for a year ... which has been lucky for [my son] because I can go to all these meetings and I can do all that sort of stuff, but when you're getting called into the school every couple of weeks, you know, or you're getting phone calls at work, 'You've got to come and pick your kid up because they've done something at school' – the disruption, with not having any discipline at school, means you haven't got any discipline at home really, I found that really hard.

Terri compared her own experience of school with that of her sons, and suggested ways in which things could be improved:

> I would like it to be where you hear about what your kids have been getting up to straight away, instead of it taking a couple of weeks.

> ...and also for it to be where there's more discipline. I just think there should be more kids sat outside the school classes like it used to be – sit outside the classroom, make them clean the toilet floor with a toothbrush, God, I remember doing that ... (laughter) ... a lot more communication with the families and not to talk down – you walk in to their boardrooms, it's always in the boardroom that you have these sort of meetings, at a big desk, you walk in, you feel like you're ... five foot tall and they're these big monsters sitting behind this desk and it's so formal ... and I think that it'd be nicer to have – maybe – a couch and offer a cup of coffee and say more like, 'This is a discussion – this isn't what we're telling you – what's your opinion on why your child is being like this?'... you know, because for me I found that they blamed me completely for the way my kids behaved – I mean, it was like, I've got no control once they leave home, of how they behave, I try to give them all the right – I was always taught you were seen and not heard, you know, you don't speak when other adults are around, I've not instilled that into my kids and I think that's a bit of a let-down on my behalf, but ... I think that not everything is down to the parents – those teenagers are so strong-willed, and especially for a single mum with boys – it's really hard to actually come across as being stern, not being violent towards them, because they will come and be violent towards you, and it would be nice if there was a lot more support for parents.

4.4 Carol

Carol talked about her step-son who was in his mid-teens at the time of the interview. Her partner had intended to be in the interview but had had to go into work unexpectedly. Carol and her partner had been together for several years and had a blended family with children from primary school age to older teens. Carol's step-son has been living with her and his father for less than a year. Before that he had been living with his mother in another part of the country, but this had not worked out and he had come back to live with his father.

Carol described what she knew of his previous school experience:

> Well, as far as I know, he has been stood down from two schools in the [area] ... the first time it was because he was not listening to the teachers and being disobedient and disruptive ... and the last time was apparently, one of the boys wanted to have a fight with [him] and he said no, he wasn't interested, and this boy went up and punched [him] and he turned around and smacked this kid back and knocked him out – and got stood down – permanently – because I don't think they class it as expelled now, do they?

She then related what had happened after he moved:

> I run around like a blue-ass fly between working ... because I work in the community ... so between doing that, I was trying to enrol him into [name] College, because we are zoned for that... They got in contact with his last school and because he'd punched the child there and knocked them out, the gentleman I'm dealing with at [the college] turned around and said that he was too much of a danger to the students at [the college] and that they wouldn't enrol him – which my reaction to that was, 'Well, we don't have $10,000 for the fines for him not being in school, so if I get that, I'm going to drop it to you to pay.'

> [They] just told me to try [other school], which we're not zoned for and [other school] which we're not zoned for – and I think I went out to [the second one] and they put me onto a lady out there who deals with alternative education.

> I found that school to be pretty pathetic – I explained the whole situation right from the word

go... I took him in with me when I very first went in to enrol him and, you know, I explained, 'This is my step-son – he's only' – well, he was 14 at the time – 'I need to get him into some sort of school, can you help me?'

The result was that her step-son was out of school for a full term. Carol went on to talk more about the lack of support:

> Interviewer: So have you had – outside of the school scene – support from any other group, agency...

> Carol: Absolutely nothing – I was actually talking to my best friend yesterday about the whole situation and she suggested maybe going to a Tough Love course – but then it's a case of trying to fit it into my schedule around my other kids.

Carol did not think she would have known where to turn if she had been in the same situation as the boy's mother when he was stood down:

> To be honest, I wouldn't know – if I was in [her] shoes and had him stood down, I honestly would not know where to go – no, I wouldn't have the foggiest.

In summary, according to Carol, it had been a hard few months:

> Financially it's a lot harder because the power has been affected, food ... emotionally, at the moment it's really pulling at my emotions ... I'm trying to keep myself together for my youngest two so they're not missing out.

The other effect on the family that Carol was particularly aware of was her concern about the way her step-son might be influencing his younger half-brother, who in her view clearly sees the 15-year-old as a hero figure.

She was asked what suggestions she would like schools to consider:

> Communication is the big thing, keeping the lines of communication open, if there's a particular student that keeps on getting into trouble, get the family in and talk to them, and you know – have the information there of what's available for the families.

> And then the Government with the no smacking law, that's just ridiculous because it's taking all power and authority away from the parents ... my

[youngest] daughter ... first day back at school this year, came home and said, 'You're not allowed to hit me and if you do, I can ring the police' – it's all very good and well telling the children that, but they're not telling the children the other side.

So I mean the schools and all the government agencies and everybody, they all need to get their heads together and re-think the way they're doing things – but the bottom line is communication.

4.5 Pam

Note: The last 10 to 15 minutes of this interview were lost as a result of technical problems.

Pam and her partner have three children – two older teenagers, and a daughter in her mid-teens. Their son had gone through school successfully, leaving after the 'fifth form', but both daughters had encountered some difficulties. The older daughter had had one year at secondary school but was stood down for truancy, and she finally ended up in alternative education. The pattern seemed to be repeating itself for the younger daughter. Pam described the experience:

It actually went way back when she was at primary – she became resentful and ... she had a lot of problems with the teachers, I don't know if it was her, but one incident ... she said the teacher was hitting her, so we had a big meeting – and the teacher actually got stood down. She seemed to like schoolwork – until she started going to intermediate and then it just sort of ... she just got worse from there – her behaviour – she kept getting into trouble, she kept wagging, she didn't want to be at school.

And then when she got to college, it was worse – it just got real worse – it wasn't worth sending her ... because she didn't want to be there.

She was stood down a few times from intermediate, then college ... she must of only went there for a little while and then – it was just getting out of hand, she just didn't want to be there.

We had a few meetings, every time things would happen and then from intermediate, I used to go in every morning because she was not getting on, you know, and getting into trouble all the time ... so I'd go in – for a while I'd go in every morning – it just kept getting more regular and more often and

it was just getting tiring and it seemed like we were wasting our time.

We were having meetings quite regularly – with the principal, the teachers – and us – and even one time her grandmother and her great-grandmother ... we all went to a meeting.

I don't actually think she got excluded, I ended up taking her out before that happened.

The meetings were just getting regular and regular and ... we had some with the board at the college ... with the board of trustees...

Didn't get much support to try and – I don't know, but it felt a bit biased – because the board stuck together for them ... but there was only me on my own.

We were looking at sending her away to boarding school ... but then she ended up getting into trouble and so – we didn't really want to send her ... it's just that it was a bit far if anything happened.

Pam said that the college principal had been very helpful in trying to arrange for her daughter to go to the boarding school but Pam decided that something more local would be preferable. She knew about the AEP as an option for her younger daughter because of her experience with the older girl. Pam expressed her concerns about the amount of schooling that her daughter had lost, largely because of 'wagging'. She described the way in which the family had handled the situation:

Interviewer: So did you feel you were getting any support from anywhere, other groups, other agencies?

Pam: No – mind you, we didn't really go anywhere and seek support, but ... they were saying counselling – I don't like to open up to anyone – we sort of find it hard opening up to people – counsellors or whoever – so we just handled it – just took it on ourselves ... and try to sort the matter out ourselves.

Interviewer: If you'd got to the point where you thought, 'I have to go and get some help – this is not working, I need to go somewhere' – where would you go, do you think?

Pam: I don't know – I wouldn't know where to go.

Interviewer: And your family was helpful? Your whānau?

Pam: Yeah – they are always – they always back us – yeah ... supportive.

Interviewer: So did they give you any particular advice?

Pam: Yeah, they were saying, you know, go and see people, counsellors and that, but I told them, I don't like counselling ... and they would come in – if it got out of hand, which a couple of times it did – they would come in and – they were a huge support – but then it still was down to us in the end ... basically, we had to decide ourselves what to do.

Pam expressed her view that her younger daughter had been strongly affected by her older sister's experience. She described how she saw the impact on their family:

Oh, huge effect – it's why my husband broke down one time – because it was the stress ... there was a lot of conflict between him and his girls ... eventually it just pulled him down – so he ended up in the hospital a few times.

4.6 Anne-Marie and Seth

Anne-Marie was present from the beginning of the interview, and part-way through was joined by her partner, Seth. Anne-Marie's daughter was in her mid-teens – her natural father had taken his own life during her primary school years, and, in the view of her mother, "She was doing quite well at school up to that point but ... it was quite hard going to school after that". Anne-Marie remarked that her daughter "started getting a bit cheeky to teachers when she was about 12", and that some significant anger problems, probably linked to her father's death, had become apparent. At the time, Anne-Marie was not aware of any difficulties through her daughter's time at intermediate school. When Anne-Marie's daughter started college, she was stood down, at which point Anne-Marie became aware that not only had there been a number of incidents at intermediate school of which she was unaware, but also that the college had received a report from the intermediate school to the effect that they needed "to watch out for this child".

Her daughter was stood down on four occasions over seven terms, for three to five days on each occasion. For one of the stand-downs, she was kept at school,

but for the others, she was sent home. In her parents' recollection, the school had provided no work for those periods of time. She left the mainstream school in term four, 2007. About a month before she left the school:

They had sent [her] on this camp which was [run by] a guy who took kids who were having problems and took them out into the bush and did skills things with them ... took them out of school for a week ... took them off the teachers' hands, I suppose ... and they talked about their problems ... they respected him and he tried to help them with their problems and when they come back, they'd be better because they'd been working on their self-esteem ... and [my daughter] felt that he really understood her.

However, at some point after the camp, the facilitator's link with the school was severed and his work with students stopped. This, in Anne-Marie's view, left her daughter without her support system within the school.

Anne-Marie talked about the process that the school had gone through with regard to standing her daughter down:

I think they did it all procedurally ... they told me that [she has] done this and that and that we have to have a meeting at school and discuss what action they're going to take ... and then we'd get into a big group of the teachers and...

Interviewer: So it came to a formal exclusion? From school?

Anne-Marie: No, she hasn't been expelled yet ... because she is actually at alternative ed[ucation] ... which is a step before expulsion.

He [the principal] said, 'Well, I want to send her to alternative ed' – like it was a good thing – 'because then I don't have to expel her – because she can sort herself out in alternative ed – if she behaves she can come back'.

They told me that they were only going to take her out for about six weeks 'til the end of the year and the next year they said, 'Oh no, we need a letter from alternative ed' and then ... so the six weeks now has become more months.

The principal said that he could expel [her] and he had every right to expel her, but he didn't want to do that because he wanted to give her a chance –

which I don't actually know if I totally believe that now.

It just seems that they're getting rid of them because they're a hassle.

Seth: The teachers don't want her back and they were putting pressure on the principal.

Interviewer: So although the school could say, 'We have not expelled [her]' – from what you're saying, it feels like ... she has been?

Anne-Marie: Yeah...

Seth: The school doesn't want her back – so it's as if the teachers have expelled her and they said to the principal, 'If you take her back, we leave.'

They thought that the school had not made any allowance for their daughter's background. Anne-Marie explained:

[My daughter] said there is kids that are worse than her, that are not expelled ... but some kids, they actually get targeted, they get a name for being mouthy – and the teachers don't like them, but I actually had a meeting with the principal ... because [my daughter] had actually been picked on by this [one] teacher and [my daughter] must have sworn at her and got into trouble ... and so we got hauled into the office – and I said, 'But the teacher actually did this and this to her' – and they said, 'Well, she's [not well] and you've got to give her some leeway' ... there's no leeway for the kids but lots of leeway for the teachers – the teachers can get away with anything, they can have bad behaviour, but a child must not have bad behaviour, otherwise you're out.

Anne-Marie had sought legal advice and had been told that what the school had done was "an illegal suspension", that she "could actually enrol her back". Although Anne-Marie felt that the possibility of alternative education had been discussed with them, she also felt that she did not really have any option but to accept the school's decision regarding the move to an AEP, as the only other option presented was a formal exclusion.

Both parents felt that their daughter had missed a significant amount of schooling through the process:

She's way behind ... like the other day she was saying, 'Oh, my friends are up to 25 credits and I've only got four' – and so it's really de-motivating as

well – it's like, 'Well, I've only got four credits, well, what's the point?'.

They talked about whether they felt they understood how the school process works:

...I sort of feel like, 'Have I been taken advantage of? Has what has happened been legal? [Are] there other options that could have been used? Could she have had some tutoring or...' – I don't really know what's available for kids like [her] – it's just not knowing.

As mentioned previously, they had taken the initiative to seek legal advice, but felt that the principal had "got a bit annoyed" when they had challenged the legality of the decisions being made. In their view, another parent:

...who doesn't know much about the law would have a real problem in trying to deal with this situation – they'd just accept what they say, probably – they might not even know where to go for the lawyer.

Although Anne-Marie had searched the internet for information on expulsion, they had not come across the MOE 'Information for Parents' website.

She discussed the effects the events had had on them as a family:

It makes you feel like a failure – well, I felt like a failure as a parent.

I've thought about giving up work to home-school her – it would affect us financially ... it's like a grief – I feel a sadness, you know.

Anne-Marie put forward some suggestions they had regarding what they felt would aid the process:

I'd like to be kept in touch – I suppose they've got a heavy workload, but I'd like to know things that are going on ... a high level of communication...

I think it would be good if there was an advocate or something that could support you – but I know that there is financial ... but if you had someone you could ring and say, 'Could you come to the meeting?' – so that I'm not door-matted by the school – because they're the authority, you're just the little parent who doesn't know any of your rights, you're up against the big place and they're just going to do this – and you want to know, 'What are my rights?'...You're in this meeting and if you do it wrong or you don't say the right thing, your kid's

kicked out and that's it, you're never going to get them back in there.

I wish that they had the cane still in school, because if they had the cane, she might be scared of that and then she might have behaved better and then she wouldn't be kicked out into this alternative ed and she would have maybe been doing quite well ... but because the teachers haven't got any grunt anymore, they have to do all these suspensions and stuff.

Seth: Basically, I think what's happened is that children today have got too much power – as parents – or as school teachers – we have got no power at all – no authority – because the kids say, 'Stuff your authority, we are not going to listen to you anyway.'

They felt schools needed to have more systems to support children with emotional difficulties. They talked about the impact on the young people of the lack of continuity when staff change. The camp facilitator leaving was one example, and also:

They had a counsellor in there and she actually got on with her and she was doing quite well and she was getting better and then the counsellor moved and then it all fell apart again.

As a postscript, when Anne-Marie returned the transcript she had been sent to check, she mentioned that she was about to go into the college for a meeting to discuss the possibility of her daughter returning to mainstream education. She wrote:

If I had this meeting today with the school in a mediation forum, I would feel a lot less nervous and more confident of a fair outcome. However, at the moment I feel like David going up against Goliath. You can put that in the report if you want.

4.7 Jessica

Jessica is a solo mother with two daughters. Her younger teenage daughter was currently attending the AEP. In Jessica's recollection her daughter had "got in with the wrong crowd" very soon after starting college and started "wagging". She described her daughter as "a very rebellious spirit, extremely outspoken ... she finds it very difficult to submit to authority figures".

Of course she'd get stood down – for cases of swearing at teachers, for answering back, for telling teachers where to go, for disrupting classes, getting

up and walking out of classes – things like that – and so it led to ... firstly it was one or two days stood down – before she was accepted into [AEP], she was off school for virtually three months because the college wasn't going to put up with it.

In her defence there was an element of injustice – I'm not taking the tack of a parent, 'My little darling does no wrong and you're to blame' – but ... [she] very quickly earned the reputation of a naughty girl – in the few instances where she was the victim – justice wasn't done by her.

Jessica named a couple of instances where she felt that her daughter had been on the receiving end of unfair treatment; she had tried to speak for her daughter on those occasions, but to no avail. However, she commented:

To be fair – as far as they were able, I think in many ways that school bent over backwards...

I think the board of trustees was as fair as they were able to be ... to be fair [she] was being very, very disruptive.

Jessica talked about her interaction with the school:

There was nothing wrong with the school's communication ... it got to the stage where I dreaded the telephone ringing and as soon as somebody said, 'This is so and so from [college]' – I thought, 'Not again' ...

Interviewer: Take me back to the short-term stand-downs – there was obviously some phone contact from the school – were there meetings? Did you actually have to go into the school?

Jessica: I found these meetings frustrating ... I can understand the need for meetings, for having parents on board, but ... it just seemed like a lot of phone conversations, talk and then all the responsibility was fired back to me. They would send her work to do at home and at the start she would do it, but then she would get frustrated because the work they sent home really bears no relation to what's in the curriculum.

A lot of this disruption in class would be ... sheer frustration because there'd be a stand-down ... she'd miss out on work, so she'd get back and be behind.

...that form of punishment was simply helping to create more of the same problem – naughty –

stand down – fall behind in work – naughty – stand down...

Interviewer: So, in those meetings, did you feel you got a voice, that you were heard, or did you feel like you were being told?

Jessica: Usually the things were scheduled at a time to suit both of us, but I remember one time ... I felt as reprimanded as the kid because she was stood down and they rang me up and they said, 'We're having a meeting on Friday at blah, blah and we expect you to be there' – and I said, 'Well I'm sorry, that time on a Friday morning is not convenient because...' 'Well the meeting time has been set and we expect you to be there.'

Interviewer: Tell me about how she came to be out of school for three months ... was she officially excluded or was it just a long stand-down?

Jessica: She wasn't expelled ... they kept her on their rolls, but they weren't prepared to have her back until a place opened up in alternative ed ... that led to a long stand-down – just this whole vicious circle of ... the truanting side of things had largely ceased, it was mainly the in-school conduct.

Jessica had kept all the correspondence from the school, and read excerpts in the interview:

It was a long suspension ... (reading from dated correspondence) 'The Board of Trustees discussed the suspension of [name] and it was resolved that the suspension be extended until [six weeks hence] or until a place becomes available at alternative ed.'

It was not completely clear how the contact with the AEP had been made – Jessica was aware that she had heard about it from other families she knew, and it had also come up in conversations with the college.

Jessica felt frustrated that all the responsibility for her daughter's behaviour was put back on her, and that there was little practical advice or support:

And even when you ask the school, 'I'm tearing my hair out at home – what suggestions have you got for me?' They'd throw up their hands – 'We have no jurisdiction in the home, that's your responsibility!'

They said I could have a meeting with the guidance counsellor but every time I tried to ring him to get

an appointment, the guidance counsellor wasn't available – it's like a business, you press button this and button that and I simply couldn't get the type of support I wanted.

Talking about the school-student-parent connection, Jessica outlined a contrast between what might happen if her daughter became pregnant with what had happened because of behaviour issues:

A 14-year-old girl can get pregnant, we may not want it but it happens ... if that 14-year-old chooses, they can go to a school guidance counsellor who is empowered by the law to take them ... to refer them ... and accompany them for an abortion ... not only without parental involvement, but without parental advising in some cases and without parental consent... Aside from the moral side of abortion, the physiological side, that is a major surgery, it is a decision that requires major counselling, and major support ... as a Christian, there is no way I condone it, but in some cases, it is a choice many women and girls do make ... and it is not something to be done lightly ... now ... that is allowable without even parental involvement ... let alone the consent of a parent, and yet ... conscious behavioural choices, – 'Well I'm not going to listen to you, you stupid old bat' – are fired back onto another person, simply because that other person is seen to have a moral and legal obligation.

She seemed to feel strongly that while her daughter had made choices to be rebellious, she, as the parent, was being punished. In fact, she felt that being stood down was not seen by her daughter (or her daughter's friends) as a punishment at all:

The last time [my daughter] was stood down before the big long one – when she was stood down, I said, 'Well, what did your mates say about that?' And she said, 'They reckon I'm lucky' – and I actually heard one of them – 'Oh, you're at home again, you lucky pig!'

She discussed the effects on her and her family. The process had obviously created some dilemmas. She had previously been to a Tough Love group:

Going to Tough Love is a way of doing something about your situation, but all these frequent stand-downs and things like that were even impacting on my attempts to be able to do something practical about my situation, because the demand

was, 'We're sending her home now' – and I'd – I remember one day replying, 'Could you wait for a couple of hours because I'm on my way to my Tough Love meeting' – and all I'd get in reply was, 'Well no, we're sending her home now and you're the parent – it's your legal responsibility', so sometimes there would be an edge in my voice, you know – and I remember a couple of times snapping at staff over the phone out of sheer frustration because it's hard enough for couples, but when you're the only adult...

Jessica has had two part-time jobs. In talking about one, she expressed her thankfulness for the understanding attitude and flexibility of her employer, as, on numerous occasions, she had not been able to get to work-related meetings. In the other, she was faced with having to go out to do the work, theoretically being able to take her daughter with her, but having a daughter who was unwilling to go along and too young to leave alone at home; trying to resolve these situations had caused tension between mother and daughter.

Jessica talked about two things which, in her view, would significantly help the situation. Firstly, she thought that having a consistent point of contact in the school would aid communication. She referred back to experiences with her older daughter:

> There was one particular teacher at that school who took my daughter's situation under her wing, so when I rang the school, I at least had that continuity with that person – one person who knew the child, knew the background to the situation, so you weren't always repeating yourself ... was being kept in the loop – every time there was a meeting, she was there.

Secondly, she talked more about her thoughts on issues of support and appropriate placing of responsibility:

> I think the existing system very much works in the favour of schools simply trying to make the problem go away.

> I used to go onto the internet and I used to see all these amazing programmes that we don't have in New Zealand, programmes in the [United] States – where young people presenting these problems ... there were programmes, residential programmes for example, sometimes subsidised for families with limited means, where these young

people were taken on board by caring, but qualified professionals, to address the whole problem – not so much as a cop-out for the parent, but to really address that situation.

> There needs to be more direct consequences – of course the parents have to be in the loop.

> In 99 percent of the cases, who makes the decision to truant? The young person. Some parents are tossers, now those parents should be worked with – and if they will not co-operate – sanctioned ... but most parents of truants do not condone truancy, do their best to try and engage their young person.

4.8 Will

Will is a solo dad, with what he describes as a good relationship with his two teenage children. His son, the focus of the conversation, was in his early teens at the time of the interview.

Before he started college there had been one incidence of being stood down, as a result of responding to being bullied. Difficulties at secondary school started half-way through Year 9, and he was stood down for two to three days on several occasions "where he was doing things that weren't appropriate – being disruptive in class and not listening to the teachers". Will had meetings with teachers and a deputy principal as the situation continued and eventually his son was "stood down on a long-term basis". Will could not recall any meetings with the board of trustees or other groups. The outcome was that the college suggested his son start attending the AEP. As part of the course, he became involved in an anger-management programme which consisted of counselling and a week-long intensive camp. Following the programme he was accepted back into mainstream college, but did not integrate back as well as everyone had hoped and at the time of the interview was back at the AEP. Will said that he felt the college had tried to find solutions, and also that he had "had quite a bit of say in the situation". He seemed to think that he knew enough about how the system works to be able to take part:

> Interviewer: If you felt like you didn't know enough – or that you weren't being treated fairly – would you know where to go for some help?

> Will: If I felt that badly about it – I'd be ringing up Citizen's Advice Bureau.

He discussed how it had been for the family:

> I found it quite ... frustrating ... because you think, you're trying to do your utmost best to help your children and then it feels like you're hitting your head against a brick wall because nothing is being ... but I have to be the cornerstone, if you'd like to put it that way – the rock for the children so that they can have something to fall back on – if I lose it then how is there going to be support for the children? I'm Mum and I'm Dad, so I have to be there for both of them, I have to be strong – no matter how I feel – I have to put my emotional feelings aside and think with logic ... if I don't think with logic and I get all emotional and upset about it ... you don't make right decisions, so that's what I feel anyway.

> ...I generally talk to my family members about how I was feeling – nine times out of 10 I would try and deal with it myself – I wouldn't go to counsellors or something like that.

> Interviewer: What impact did all this have on work or ... time off work for meetings?

> Will: That was quite good because ... if anything was happening with home issues or things like that, I'd just be honest to the boss and just let him know what's happening and what I might have to do – and I'd bring him in appointment notices and tell him, 'Well, this is when I've got to go' and – I can't help but take time off work because to me my family is number one and my job is secondary... I find as long as you had explained it to them, let them know how things are – most people have quite a bit of empathy for you.

> Interviewer: Do you see any effects of the whole process on your daughter?

> Will: ...my daughter is quite strong in herself – very positive mind – she didn't portray anything to where it was upsetting her or hurting her ... she would talk to me if she felt something was out of place or something was wrong and I'd have a conversation with her about it ... but besides that – no, I don't think there was a hang of a lot of effects that was happening to her.

Will commented on what he saw as important in the process:

> I think they're [the school] doing quite well with what they're doing – more communication that's all ... I think the communication is a key factor when it comes to the parents, but that's again ... if the parents are prepared to listen.

> They might think, well, the sun shines out of their child's 'you-know-what' ... and all in all, they're not listening because they're blinded because they think their child's not doing anything.

> I think the main key to anything is communication – like, if a child is playing up more than twice in a week, or even three times in a week – it's like the same thing at work ... you get warnings because you're doing something you're not supposed to be doing. And you get first warning, second warning and third warning – if they've done it more than twice in a week, well then, I think that it could be a concern that the parents need to know there and then – but that way the child is not going to think he is going to get away with it ... of course, they have no more corporal punishment in schools, the system that is there – I think as a child they can do just about anything that they want – and subsequently you do get a lot of children who are misbehaving because they don't have to listen to the teachers.

5. DISCUSSION

Three points should be made about the discussion of the interview content. Firstly, the focus of the report is the effect on families of exclusion from school. There is much in the interviews that could be gleaned on various aspects of exclusion, but the intent is to stay with the family focus. As previously mentioned, the report is presented with the awareness that only one perspective of each scenario is being given. However, the fact that others may remember the situation in a different way does not invalidate the experiences and memories of the parents involved. Secondly, in relation to the issue of subjectivity, the discussion is selective. The cameos have been presented in a way that will allow the reader to see different facets of the issue other than those highlighted. Thirdly, the intention is to discuss what has been presented without making inappropriate generalisations, or naïve prescriptive solutions.

The discussion starts with some general observations on the data and the interviews. Sections 5.2 to 5.4 consider the process experienced by the parents, together with thoughts on communication and emotional impact. Sections 5.5 to 5.9 reflect on other themes from the interviews, in no particular order. The final section brings together the preceding themes, focusing on the participants' perceptions of their relationships with the school.

5.1 General reflections on the interviews

The parents who were interviewed gave their time generously and openly. In retrospect, the chosen methodology seemed to allow each parent the freedom to share thoughts and experiences in a relatively unhindered manner, and for those views to be presented in again a relatively open format, uncluttered by researcher emphasis.

They communicated as articulate people, and as caring and involved parents who had invested considerable time and energy into the teenagers about whom they were talking. Many of them had taken initiative to seek help or to explore the internet for information. They were clearly stressed, to varying degrees, not only by the interaction with the schools involved, but also by their adolescents' behaviour, and often aware of their own self-perceived shortcomings as parents.

Clearly, they were not parents who believed that their teenagers could do no wrong. Most said quite explicitly that they were not the type to believe "that the sun shines out of their child's 'you-know-what'", to borrow Will's phrase.

It is also important to note that while many of the participants had concerns about the way the process had been undertaken, and while some strong opinions were voiced, none of the participants was bitter towards the schools concerned, or appeared to be using the opportunity to 'get at' any school or individual. All the parents interviewed respected the introductory comment that the names of the school or any individual member of staff did not need to be known.

Each interviewee seemed to genuinely appreciate the opportunity to talk about their experience and to feel listened to – an appreciation seemingly rooted in a previous not feeling heard.

5.2 The process of exclusion

The project was designed to look at families and exclusion, but it seemed that only Michelle's daughter had actually been formally excluded. Initially, there was concern that the interviewees would be ineligible for the project because of the lack of formal exclusion processes. But all of the parents *felt* as if their child had been excluded from mainstream education, and for all practical purposes they had been excluded, even though the schools had not conducted a formal exclusion process as outlined by the MOE (2003).

> Interviewer: So what I'm hearing is that the school didn't go through a formal exclusion process ...
>
> Terri: No...
>
> Interviewer: But the end result was you feel like [your son] was excluded from the school...
>
> Terri: Yeah, yeah, definitely.
>
> Interviewer: So although the school could say, 'We have not expelled [her]' – from what you're saying, it feels like ... she has been?
>
> Anne-Marie: Yeah.
>
> Seth: The school doesn't want her back – so it's as if the teachers have expelled her and they said to the principal, 'If you take her back, we leave.'

In summary, one teenager had been formally excluded. One parent had removed her daughter because she could see exclusion was inevitable and did not want her daughter to experience it – a situation similar to that referred to in the literature review (A parent's story, 2002). Four students were 'sidelined' into alternative education following periods of stand-down, but before formal exclusion. Two young people were effectively barred from acceptance into a secondary school when they moved to the area, on the basis of reputation or record. The routes to exclusion are diverse and do not neatly follow the MOE guidelines (2003). They are, as Berkeley (1999) describes them, "stories about not fitting in, stories which stubbornly refuse to fit in" (p.19).

These situations of informal exclusion obviously raise a number of issues. Firstly, it is apparent that several of these young people were out of school, and out of education, for prolonged periods. Secondly, the stories provoke the question of the 'correctness' of some of the processes that the schools employed. Terri said "I think they did it procedurally". While Jessica said that the school had in many ways "bent over backwards", she and other parents had concerns about the process followed. At face value, in many of the situations, it would seem that the school did not follow the MOE guidelines (2003), either by not holding meetings with the board of trustees or by failing to seek or provide alternative mainstream schooling options in the event of a prolonged suspension. Certainly, some of the parents received legal advice, and feedback from contact with Ministry advisors, that suggested the process was not being correctly followed. While it is not possible to know the schools' perceptions of their actions, the significant point for this study is that the parents described processes that, in their view, were open to question and left them feeling excluded. Additionally, in situations where there was no formal exclusion, the parents were left without a clear sense of process or a timeframe for the school to consider their teenager's re-entry into mainstream education.

Finally, assuming that the MOE statistics (*Exclusions and expulsions from school,* 2007) are based on formal exclusions, these parents' experiences and perceptions cast doubt on whether we appreciate the true extent of exclusion. Certainly five, and possibly seven, out of the eight situations would not appear in the statistics, despite the apparent reality that

eight students had been excluded from mainstream schools. Clearly there seems some disparity between exclusion as an objective process and exclusion as a subjective experience.

It is obviously not possible to know the motivations behind school staff diverting students into alternative education:

> The principal said that he could expel [her] and he had every right to expel her, but he didn't want to do that because he wanted to give her a chance – which I don't actually know if I totally believe that now. (Anne-Marie)

It is possible that just like Pam in the study, and 'Susan's mother' (A parent's story, 2002), the principal was acting so as to avoid the student having a formal exclusion on their record. However, as Gordon (2001) points out, "informal and unofficial 'expulsions' which remain unmeasured and discretionary" (p.70) may be seen as a way of achieving the goal of reducing the number of formal exclusions, aiding a school's academic achievement record or simply as an easy way of avoiding the challenge of dealing with students who fall into the 'too hard basket' – what Berkeley (1999) refers to as a "quick fix" (p.12).

5.3 Communication

Several of the parents interviewed said that they would have hoped for, if not expected, more communication from the school before a stand-down was implemented. Communication can be viewed both in terms of the passing on of factual information and also in terms of a relationship. With respect to the informational element, one of the parents commented:

> We didn't get any feedback from the school to say things aren't going well, this child is still subdued to peer pressure – nothing! Until she'd done things wrong and then they contacted us – 'We've got a problem'. (Linda)

> It took a while for the school to get in contact with me about what he was getting up to; I always thought that they got in contact with you. (Terri)

Others, such as Will, felt that communication had been reasonable. However, at the point where the school instituted a stand-down process, many of the parents, even in situations where they felt the school had communicated reasonably, did not seem

particularly well-informed about how the process worked. Of more concern is that several of them said that either what they had discovered had been the result of their initiative, or that they really had no idea where to go to find information. Several had used family members, or other families in similar situations, as a resource. Each parent was asked if they were aware of the existence of the MOE website designed to aid parents and caregivers. None of them, including those who had explored the internet, were aware of the site. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one of the recurring suggestions made in the interviews related to communication – not only in the form of ongoing dialogue, but also the communication of information:

> I think there should be an information pack that goes out to all parents ... about how if anything happens, what they can do, who they can turn to. (Michelle)

Looking at communication from a relational perspective, Anne-Marie commented on the disrupting effect of not having consistent communication with one person. This had been difficult for her, and she also noted that changes in staff had affected her daughter's sense of security and acceptance within the school. While staff turn over is inevitable, recognition of the impact on vulnerable teenagers could be of assistance.

5.4 Emotional impact

It is evident from the interviews that the circumstances surrounding the children being excluded were stressful, and affected the families negatively. It is obviously impossible to isolate the specific contribution of the school to that stress, and the parents were honest in acknowledging that, apart from any educational issues, the adolescents themselves were challenging and created stress. It is significant, however, that as described by the parents, interaction with the school appeared to exacerbate rather than alleviate an already stressful situation. The parents report many of the negative experiences recorded in the international literature already discussed.

Several parents said they felt they were talked down to, criticised and blamed in meetings; they expressed varying levels of anger, frustration and grief. Jessica was very clear about her sense of being punished, and Linda had felt "bullied". It was evident that both attitude and environment contributed to this sense:

> Every time I asked a question, the dean would shut me down and make it look like I was the one that was in the wrong ... they made you feel like, 'Look after your children properly'. (Michelle)

> You walk in to their boardrooms – it's always in the boardroom that you have these sort of meetings, at a big desk – you walk in, you feel like you're ... five foot tall and they're these big monsters sitting behind this desk and it's so formal. (Terri)

There were common threads of not being able to stand up to or disagree with the school's view or decision, or of not really having much choice other than to acquiesce.

Terri again:

> I feel really intimidated at schools, I always have done, I feel like – they probably don't even realise, but you feel like you're getting spoken down to by the principal and the deputy principal, because you don't know the runnings of the school ... 'If he doesn't do this, then he'll be excluded and you'll have to home-school him' – and that was my biggest fear was having him home-schooled again.

The emotional impact and stress of the circumstances was exacerbated by the parents' sense of having to take on responsibility for their child's education – either as de facto teacher, or in the role of organising alternative placements.

Interactions between school and family are inherently complex. As Cullingford (1999) points out, teenagers are not blind to the way their parents are treated by their school, and what they see is likely to influence their own view of and response to school staff.

5.5 Exclusion as punishment

Jessica's feeling of being punished for her daughter's behaviour has already been mentioned. Sitting alongside this is the sense expressed by several of the parents that stand-downs and exclusion are often not seen as punishment by teenagers:

> Hey, what do kids want? 'Don't come to school' – yay! They want that – they want to be told they can't come – that's what half of them want, they can roam the bloody streets and do what they like! (Linda)

'Well, what did your mates say about that?' and she said, 'They reckon I'm lucky' – and I actually heard one of them – 'Oh, you're at home again, you lucky pig!' (Jessica)

To pursue the question of the purpose of stand-downs and exclusion, referred to in the literature review, would be to stray from the family focus of this discussion. Clearly, however, if the purpose is to act as punishment or deterrent (Brown, 2007; Parsons, 2005), then, in the view of this group of parents, these goals are not being achieved. Several parents noted the disruption to learning that resulted from not being at school. This, in some situations, was linked with consequent anxiety concerning the teenager's future opportunities. If the 'punishment' of exclusion is achieving that outcome, it could be argued that exclusion is unhelpful both for the individual and also for society as a whole. While misbehaviour clearly needs some form of disciplinary response, in the view of the parents interviewed the outcomes are not constructive.

The view was frequently expressed in the interviews that both schools and parents have lost the upper hand when it comes to discipline:

'Why don't you get her in on the weekend to clean the school as a punishment, for not turning up ... ?' 'Oh no, we're not allowed to enforce that sort of thing.' Well, for God's sake, you're not allowed to smack, you're not allowed to enforce disciplinary action ... that's why these kids are just doing whatever the hell they like, when they like – because there is no consequences. (Linda)

And then the Government with the no smacking law, that's just ridiculous because it's taking all power and authority away from the parents – my [youngest] daughter, first day back at school this year, came home and said, 'You're not allowed to hit me and if you do, I can ring the police.' (Carol)

Basically, I think what's happened is that children today have got too much power. As parents, or as school teachers, we have got no power at all – no authority – because the kids say, 'Stuff your authority, we are not going to listen to you anyway.' (Seth)

The parents seemed to feel a deep sense of frustration, and, at times, desperation, over how to effectively deal with bad behaviour. However, none seemed to be abusive or callous parents. This report is not the place

to enter into the emotionally charged debate associated with the repeal of section 59 of the Crimes Act in 2007. However, this group of parents seem to be calling for appropriate concerns for the protection and rights of a child to be balanced by support for parents and schools in achieving effective discipline.

5.6 Whose responsibility?

One concern expressed by the parents was that while the schools carried out the process, considerable educational time had been lost. (Incidentally, one of the factors contributing to the director of the AEP's support for this project was her concern over how much schooling time had been lost by the teenagers she took in the AEP). The parental concern was compounded by experiences in which either the school appeared to be passing the responsibility for educating the teenager to the parent (as in Terri's story), or the school was providing work without the necessary support to make it achievable (as in Jessica's story), or work was either not provided (Anne-Marie) or provided very late in the sequence of events (Michelle).

On the issue of parents' responsibility for their teenagers, for Jessica there was clearly a confusing paradox, illustrated by her contrasting the response to bad behaviour with her perception of the likely reaction of a school to a teenager disclosing that she is pregnant. It seems that for this parent there is a sense of a school giving mixed messages to parents about their responsibility for their children, and their fitness to care for them.

5.7 Other effects on the family

Many of the group had experienced difficulties associated with work or financial repercussions resulting from exclusion:

I'm self-employed, I had to have all that time off work, even now ... I still haven't been able to get back on track with my job... (Michelle)

The disruption is not just from being at home for longer periods of time when a child is stood down or excluded, but also about the intermittent and more immediate demands of responding when a student is sent home, or a meeting is called.

Will and Jessica were appreciative of empathetic and flexible employers – and would obviously have been much more affected by a 'harder line' response. The

literature review mentioned the views of a politician and a principal that parents should stay at home to look after their children (Parents of suspened students should stay at home says Blair, 2005; Partington, 2001). While they are entitled to their opinion, in practice this is easier said than done. Many parents are working in order to survive financially and to provide the basics, not luxuries – and the financial burden is increased in situations where time out of school is for an extended period.

The effect on the working situation, however, is not just about the financial implications. It is also about the person's sense of integrity and their reputation and credibility. Jessica was concerned about her personal sense of wanting to fulfil her obligations to an employer. Michelle commented:

> I lost a lot of clients – you've got to be very reliable and people couldn't rely on me to turn up because, just randomly I'd have to say, 'Look sorry, I can't make it' and so that wasn't very good.

Another less obvious financial effect – on the community rather than the individual – is the cost of health care. Both Linda and Pam's partner had significant health problems and had been hospitalised which, if caused or exacerbated by the exclusion, would represent substantial hidden costs of exclusion.

In terms of family dynamics, some parents reported that the process of exclusion had caused deterioration in their teenagers' behaviour, and also in relationships at home.

One final consequence noted by the parents interviewed is the influence on younger siblings. Both Pam and Terri had been through exclusion with two of their children and felt that the younger sibling had been influenced by watching the experience of the older teenager. Carol mentioned her eight-year-old's hero-worship of his older half-brother. Michelle commented on how her younger child:

> ...was very nervous all the time, and worried that he was going to say or do something wrong that would add to the stress.

Linda talked about her two younger children's negative reaction to their sister. These accounts present a range of unique situations, but all indicate similar circumstances that a parent has to contend with at an already challenging time. Perhaps, if the

information pack that Michelle advocated existed, it could include a note for parents to be aware of the potential impact on younger siblings – to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

5.8 A point of contrast

While their interaction with mainstream schools had largely been challenging and stressful, all the parents interviewed spoke positively about the AEP – some in glowing terms:

> They've organised family counselling, individual counselling, the whole lot, they've just done more for us than anyone ever has. (Linda)

> I love [AEP], they're just great and he really enjoys it, he comes home happy and in a really good mood ... I think they're a lot more understanding and they don't take no crap. (Terri)

Although Anne-Marie felt that her daughter's behaviour had deteriorated since being at the AEP, the rest of the parents felt that their teenagers were making progress educationally and behaviourally. This suggests that it is possible for a school to relate positively and constructively to students who present a challenge. It would also seem that these students have the capacity both to relate well and to learn, and that they are not beyond 'salvaging' as suggested by one of the board of trustees members whom Michelle encountered.

It could be argued that some teenagers cope better and achieve more in the environment provided by alternative education, and that therefore they should be quite appropriately channelled in that direction. While that may be true, the route by which a student arrives at alternative education must be important in considering the overall picture. The teenagers represented in this study arrived by a process of 'exclusion'. The term itself flies in the face of current advocacy of social inclusion (Bromell & Hyland, 2007). Beyond the name, the process is described by McDonald and Thomas (2003) as a "brutal enterprise" (p.116), and by 'Susan's mother' as "rejection at a most vulnerable time" (A parent's story, 2002) – hardly a positive contribution to the development of identity and self-esteem.

5.9 Adversarial language

The language used by the parents seems to place the school-parent interaction in an adversarial frame, and reflects a perception of 'them and us':

I got a phone call to say that she wasn't welcome back at the school and she would have to attend a board meeting and she was to be back at the school at a particular date, in uniform and that **she was going up against the board** to see if it would be alright for her to be allowed back into the school or not. (Michelle) – author's emphasis

It felt a bit biased – because the board stuck together for them – but there was only me on my own. (Pam)

Two mothers talked about seeking legal advice:

[A parent] who doesn't know much about the law would have a real problem in trying to deal with this situation – they'd just accept what they say, probably – they might not even know where to go for the lawyer. (Anne-Marie)

To be honest if someone asked me – if you've got money, go and see a lawyer and see what your legal rights are and what are the rights of your kids. (Terri)

This, however, would not seem to be by parental choice, but rather a response to a perception of how the system works. The wording in the MOE guidelines (2003) tends at times to reinforce this way of seeing the process: "it is preferable that the board gives the direction in writing so that it can defend its position if challenged" (p.3). It appeared that the participants did not view such a legally oriented, adversarial positioning as either desirable or necessary:

I think that it'd be nicer to have – maybe – a couch and offer a cup of coffee and say more like, 'This is a discussion – this isn't what we're telling you – what's your opinion on why your child is being like this?' (Terri)

Positioning parents and schools in a legal, oppositional framework has significant implications. Firstly, in this situation, it appears as if the school acts not only as prosecutor, but also as judge and jury. While the board of trustees may nominally act as an impartial 'judge', when the board of trustees was involved the parents perceived the board of trustees as more aware of, and more sympathetic to, the school side of the story. Also, judging from the way the interviewees described their experience, they were unable to see the board of trustees members, when they were involved, as being anything other than an extension of the school hierarchy. Secondly, in a legal context, both parties would usually have access to informed, expert

representation. This would seem not to have been the experience of the parents in this study. Thirdly, school-as-prosecutor and parent-as-defendant emphasised Jessica's sense that she was the one being punished, rather than her daughter. These observations suggest that the relationship between school and home should be reconsidered.

5.10 Parents as problems, people, or partners?

Borrowing and modifying the title of Tett's (2001) study as the heading for this last section is a useful way of pulling together the themes from this study. Tett (2001) draws attention to how education providers' "different conceptions of the purposes and their underpinning values can lead to different outcomes particularly in relation to their conceptualisation of the role of the 'parent'" (p.188). As previously discussed, many of the parents had experienced a sense of being labelled by the schools in a negative way – either as a failure or as in some way responsible for the problems or (as in Linda's case) a nuisance.

Within these observations lies a sad paradox. The new New Zealand Curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007) clearly roots the specifics of subject content in values: "every decision relating to curriculum and every interaction that takes place in a school reflects the values of the individuals involved and the collective values of the institution" (p.10).

The values listed by the curriculum document include equity, community and participation, integrity and respect. While there seem to be individual exceptions (for example, the principal who made the deputy principal apologise to Linda for inappropriate labelling, and the counsellor who followed up on Michelle's daughter), the parents' reported experiences would suggest that these values were not being lived out in their interactions with the schools. How, it might be asked, are students going to absorb these principles if they do not see them lived out in the way the school behaves outside of the classroom?

Applying the values of the curriculum document is inconsistent with labelling parents as problems. However, there is much in the interviews to advocate not simply treating parents with respect, but rather moving towards accepting them as partners. These parents communicate care and commitment, linked with a long-term knowledge and understanding of their children:

> I made it very clear to them that this was not your average, everyday student – this particular student was going to need lots of ... I've been through this a thousand times with schools, I know how she functions, I know how she works. (Michelle)

> I know my son – I know he's a mouthy little shit and he does your head in, but he's not a bad, bad kid. (Terri)

Involving parents to a greater extent in the process would include earlier and more open communication, responding to the concerns mentioned in section 5.3.

Several of the parents commented on their disappointment that the school did not appear to make any allowance for circumstances. The teenagers discussed had a number of challenging situations to contend with, including paternal suicide, historical abuse, physical disability and parental marriage break-up. While accepting that none of these issues is an excuse for bad behaviour, the parents were clearly hoping for some understanding and an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, which does not seem to have been offered.

In a paper addressed to school leaders, Hattie (2002) asks, "how successful are you at making parents part of the answer not the problem of educational outcomes of your students and teachers?" (p.9). Whilst Professor Hattie's question was posed in the context of curriculum and academic achievement, it is equally relevant to the focus of this report. Harrison's (2004) discussion of the role of government in education makes a strong case for allowing parents to be involved in decisions regarding their children's schooling:

> The general rationales for parental decision-making – that parents know the child best, care the most and bear the cost of bad decisions – also apply in education, perhaps even more strongly because what is an appropriate education depends on the individual, and the consequences of education are often long-term (p.67).

Harrison (2004) also states that there is little evidence to suggest that socio-economic status influences the ability to make good educational choices for children in the family.

Echoing another of Harrison's (2004) comments – that parents are not perfect – Michelle and Jessica were both aware that some parents might not be as caring or involved as they saw themselves to be:

> Let's say you've got a teenager who smokes marijuana – the parents know about it, the parents allow it to happen at home because they've got no control over this child, the parents probably do it anyway – at school, you know, the parents should be a bit more open and honest about what's going on, if they really want to help that child – they need to be completely honest about what's going on, I think (Michelle)

> Some parents are tossers, now those parents should be worked with – and if they will not co-operate – sanctioned ... but most parents of truants do not condone truancy, do their best to try and engage their young person. (Jessica)

While not all parents might be willing or able to act as partners, an inclusive ethos would at least give parents a fair opportunity to be involved, rather than writing them out of the script from the outset.

Building on the potential of parents as partners, there appears to be a significant body of international empirical research that demonstrates positive outcomes for all concerned arising from co-operative, multi-agency approaches (eg, Milbourne, 2005; Stanley, et al 2006; Van Hoose & Legrand, 2000; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). Admittedly, in the current study, some of the families accessed other agencies for assistance. However, this seems to have been at the initiative of the families themselves and to have happened in a somewhat random fashion, with little evidence of collaboration or inter-agency communication. Michelle communicated a belief that things could be different:

> I think that there needs to be – having all the services that can be involved work together and come up with one action plan. And I think that if there was someone in the schools doing that, talking with parents, the student and perhaps bringing in services that would assist with that student, and how to keep that student in school, coming up with one plan.

Relationships between the various players in the situation are complex, with each one influencing all the others. However, it seems that not all players have equal voices or equal power to contribute in constructive ways to the situation, even when they have the desire and ability to do so.

6. CONCLUSION

The few parents whose voices have been heard in the research literature describe a sense of invisibility or powerlessness when their teenagers were excluded from school. The comparative lack of parents' voices in the research literature on exclusion, mirrors that sense of invisibility or powerlessness. This study sought to give voice to the views of a group of New Zealand caregivers. Disappointingly, the comments of the participants reflect similar parental experience and perception to those reported in previous studies from other countries. The sadness, anger and powerlessness described by caregivers in other studies were similarly reported by parents in this study. Exclusion of a teenager created stress for the families, particularly regarding employment and health issues. The parents reported an experience that was adversarial in nature, and they felt that there was scope for them to have much more involvement and for stronger partnerships between themselves and the schools.

The findings seem disturbing – in terms of concern for the well being of those families – given the volume of research that demonstrates positive outcomes from more collaborative processes.

This conclusion highlights certain aspects of the study that warrant attention. Firstly, the issue of communication and information was consistently mentioned by the participants. While information may be theoretically accessible, it appears that more attention could be given to connecting families to those sources of support. The parents interviewed seemed unaware of resources, in terms of information, internet sites and support services. There was a plea that communication should not be simply informational but also relational.

The desire for a relational connection with a school leads to consideration of the ways in which parents are seen – either as problems or partners. The contrasting discourses in discussions of exclusion merit further attention, both in terms of the goals of the process and in terms of the ways the people involved think about

each other. Underpinning philosophies influence policy, and also subconsciously orient people into particular patterns of relating. The self-reported experiences of parents in this study indicate that in practice, if not necessarily by intent, the schools that had excluded or taken steps to exclude their children seem to have created an adversarial and excluding ethos around exclusion, which had negatively affected the families concerned. Such an ethos may make life simpler for the school in the short term, but is likely to be counter-productive for all concerned in the longer term. It also seems out of line with the values being advocated as a foundation of the new curriculum.

The study has mentioned that the voice of parents is lacking from research literature. However, literature tends to focus on policy and outcomes, and it should be noted that the views of the school staff who have to put policy into practice, in the middle of often very challenging circumstances, are also missing within research reports. Further study could benefit from hearing the experience of principals and staff as well as studies such as this one.

The views of the parents in this study also highlight the desirability of exploring more collaborative, multi-agency approaches that include parents as partners wherever possible. Further research is warranted to explore the potential for such models in New Zealand, and also to develop new practice, especially in the light of encouraging reports from other countries.

One final observation is that the parents in this study communicated a sense of hope – a belief both that the systems they had encountered could be different, and also that their teenagers, through alternative education if not in mainstream schooling, could make something of their lives. This seems to be yet another illustration of the resilience of the family unit. Anne-Marie talked about feeling like David going up against Goliath. In the original story David was the victor. Parental resilience and hope may win out, but maybe educational policy and school practice could evolve so that parents do not need to cast themselves as David challenging Goliath in the first place.

REFERENCES

A parent's story. (2002, Autumn). *Education Links,* 64: 39. Retrieved 1 March 2008, from the EBSCOhost database.

Arum, R. (2003). *Judging school discipline: The crisis of moral authority.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Barone, T. (1992). 'Beyond theory and method: A case of critical storytelling'. *Theory into Practice,* 31(2): 142–146.

BBC Action Network Team. (2004, May). *How to challenge suspension and expulsion in Northern Ireland.* Retrieved 7 March 2008, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/A2286434

Berkeley, R. (1999). *Not fitting in: Exclusions from school, a local study.* Paper presented at the British Educational Association Conference, Brighton, England, September 2–5.

Brodie, I., & Berridge, D. (1996). *School exclusion: Research themes and issues.* University of Luton Press, UK.

Bromell, D., & Hyland, M. (2007, March). *Social inclusion and participation: A guide for policy and planning.* Ministry of Social Development, Wellington.

Brown, T. (2007). 'Lost and turned out: Academic, social and emotional experiences of students excluded from school'. *Urban Education,* 42(5): 432–455.

Bryman, A. (2001). *Social research methods.* Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2000). *Reading aid* Routledge Falmer, London.

Cole, A.L., & Knowles, J.G. (Eds). (2001). *Lives in context: The art of life history research.* AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

Cullingford, C. (1999). *The causes of exclusion: Home, school and the development of young criminals.* Kogan Page Ltd, London.

Exclusions and expulsions from school. (2007). Retrieved 20 March, 2008, from http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/indicators/student_participation...

Goebert, D.A., Bell, C.K., Hishinuma, E.S., Nahulu, L.B., Johnson, R.C., Foster, J. et al. (2004). 'Influence of family adversity on school-related behavioural problems among multi-ethnic high school students'. *School Psychology International,* 25(2): 193–206.

Goodson, I.F., & Sikes, P. (2001). *Life history research in educational settings.* Open University Press, Buckingham.

Gordon, A. (2001). 'School exclusions in England: Children's voices and adult solutions?' *Educational Studies,* 27(1): 69–85.

Harrison, M. (2004). *Education matters: Government, markets and New Zealand schools.* Education Forum, Wellington.

Harvard Family Research Project. (2008). *Family involvement publications and resources.* Retrieved 29 July 2008, from http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources?topic=11

Hattie, J. (2002, April). *School research: How, what and why: Six things leaders should know about educational research.* Retrieved 9 May 2008, from www.education.auckland.ac.nz/.../leadership/Six_things_school_leaders_should_know_(2002).pdf

Information for parents. (2003, June). Retrieved 28 March 2008, from http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl3861_v1/parent-info.pdf

Inter-agency working to prevent school exclusion. (2001, September). Retrieved 3 April 2008, from http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/social policy/961.asp

Knipe, D., Reynolds, M., & Milner, S. (2007). 'Exclusion in schools in Northern Ireland: The pupils' voice'. *Research Papers in Education,* 22(4): 407–424.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Lewis, C.S. (1945/2000). *That hideous strength.* HarperCollins, London.

Links between school, family and the community: A review of the evidence. (1999, November). Retrieved 4 April, 2008, from http://www.jrf.org.uk/knlwledge/findings/socialpolicy/N19.asp

Linson, A. (Producer), & Cuaron, A. (Director). (1997). *Great expectations* [Motion picture]. 20th Century Fox Film Corporation, USA.

Lloyd, G. (2000). 'Gender and exclusion from school'. In J. Salisbury & S. Riddell (Eds), *Gender, policy and educational change: Shifting agendas in the UK and Europe* (pp. 257–273). Routledge, London.

McDonald, T., & Thomas, G. (2003). 'Parents' reflections on their children being excluded'. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties,* 8(2): 108–119.

Milbourne, L. (2005, December). 'Children, families and inter-agency work: Experiences of partnership work in primary education settings'. *British Educational Research Journal,* 31(6): 675–695.

Ministry of Education. (2003). *Guidelines for principals and boards of trustees of state and state-integrated schools.* Retrieved 23 October, 2008, from http://www.minedu.govt.nz/educationSectors/Schools/SchoolOperations/StanddownsSuspensionsExclusionsExpulsions/GuidelinesOnStandDowns/1_Introduction.aspx

Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in years 1–13.* Learning Media Ltd, Wellington.

Muijs, D., Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Raffo, C., Goldrick, S., Kerr, K., et al. (2007). *Leading under pressure: Leadership for social inclusion.* Retrieved 4 April 2008, from http://www.leadspace. govt.nz/leadership/articles/social-inclusion.php

Munn, P., & Lloyd, G. (2005). 'Exclusion and excluded pupils'. *British Educational Research Journal,* 31(2): 205–221.

Parents of suspended pupils should stay at home says Blair. (2005, 22 July) *Education*, 188: 2. Retrieved 1 March, 2008, from the EBSCOhost database.

Parsons, C. (2005, June). 'School exclusion: The will to punish'. *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 53(2): 187–211.

Partington, G. (2001, December). 'Student suspensions: The influence on students and their parents'. *Australian Journal of Education,* 45(3): 323. Retrieved 5 September, 2007, from http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark...

Sharkey, P. (2001). 'Hermeneutic phenomenology'. In R. Barnacle (Ed), *Phenomenology.* (Chapter 2, Pages ...). RMIT University Press, Melbourne.

Stand-downs and suspensions from school. (2007, 13 April). Retrieved 5 September 2007, from http://www. educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/indicators/engagement/ simu5.html

Stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions. (n.d.). Retrieved 29 February 2008, from http://www.teamup.co.nz/ secondary/helpful/StandSuspExc/default.htm

Stanley, M.J., Canham, D.L., & Cureton, V.Y. (2006, February). 'Assessing prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems in suspended middle school students'. *The Journal of School Nursing,* 22(1): 40–47.

Tett, L. (2001, May/June). 'Parents as problems or parents as people? Parental involvement programmes, schools and adult educators'. *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 20(3): 188–198.

Van Hoose, J., & Legrand, P. (2000, January). 'It takes parents, the whole village, and school to raise the children'. *Middle School Journal,* 31(3): 32–37.

Vulliamy, G., & Webb, R. (2003, Winter). 'Supporting disaffected pupils: Perspectives from the pupils, their parents and their teachers'. *Educational Research,* 45(3): 275–286.

Blue Skies Research

1/06   *Les Familles et Whānau sans Frontières: New Zealand and transnational family obligation,* Lunt with McPherson & Browning, March 2006.

2/06   *Two Parents, Two Households: New Zealand data collections, language and complex parenting,* Calister & Birks, March 2006.

3/06   *Grandfathers – Their Changing Family Roles and Contributions,* Wilton & Davey, March 2006.

4/06   *Neighbourhood Environments that Support Families,* Witten, Penney, Faalau & Jensen, May 2006.

5/06   *New Communication Technologies and Family Life,* Weatherall & Ramsay, May 2006.

6/06   *Families and Heavy Drinking: Impacts on children's wellbeing,* Systematic Review, Girling, Huakau, Casswell & Conway, June 2005.

7/06   *Beyond Demography: History, ritual and families in the twenty-first century,* Pryor, June 2005.

8/06   *Whānau is Whānau,* Walker, Ngāti Porou, July 2006.

9/06   *Supervised Contact: The views of parents and staff at three Barnardos Contact Centres in the southern region of New Zealand,* Gibbs & McKenzie, August 2006.

10/06   *New Zealanders' Satisfaction with Family Relationships and Parenting,* Robertson, August 2006.

11/06   *Korean Migrant Families in Christchurch: Expectations and experiences,* Chang, Morris & Vokes, October 2006.

12/06   *The Role of Whānau in the Lives of Māori with Physical Disabilities,* Collins & Hickey, September 2006.

13/06   *New Spaces and Possibilities: The adjustment to parenthood for new migrant mothers,* DeSouza, November 2006.

14/06   *New Zealand Cultural Norms of Parenting and Childcare and How These Relate to Labour Force Participation Decisions and Requirements,* McPherson, November 2006.

15/06   *Towards a Statistical Typology of New Zealand Households and Families: The efficacy of the family life cycle model and alternatives,* Crothers & McCormack, December 2006.

16/07   *The Family Court, Families and the Public Gaze,* Cheer, Caldwell & Tully, April 2007.

17/07   *Fairness, Forgiveness and Families,* Ian Evans, Tomoko Yamaguchi, Raskauskas & Harvey, April 2007.

18/07   *Managing Multiple Sclerosis and Motherhood: Women's stories,* Payne, McPherson & Crerar, May 2007.

19/07   *Diverse Forms of Pacific Families and their Financial Decision-making Approaches,* Koloto & Katoanga, September 2007.

20/07   *Lifelines: Young New Zealanders imagine family, friends and relationships across their life-course,* Patterson, Peace, Campbell & Parker, September 2007.

21/07   *Older Adults' Experience of Family Life: Linked lives and independent living,* Breheney & Stephens, November 2007.

22/08   *Whānau Socialisation Through Everyday Talk: A pilot study,* Tomlins-Jahnke & Durie, January 2008.

23/08   *Strengthening Rural Families – An exploration of industry transformation, community and social capital,* Goodrich & Sampson, April 2008.

24/08   *Grandparents in Rural Families: Young people's perspectives,* Keeling, Glasgow & Morris, July 2008.

25/09   *Settling in: Parent-adolescent family dynamics in the acculturation process,* Stuart, Jose & Ward February 2009.

26/09   *Sent Home: The impact on the family of a child's exclusion from school,* A Smith, March 2009.

This report is available on the Commission's website www.nzfamilies.org.nz or contact the Commission to request copies
Families Commission
PO Box 2839
Wellington 6140
Telephone: 04 917 7040
Email: enquiries@nzfamilies.org.nz

families commission
kōmihana ā *whānau*

➢ Giving New Zealand families a voice *Te reo o te whānau*

Wellington office
Public Trust Building, Level 6
117–125 Lambton Quay
PO Box 2839, Wellington 6140
Phone 04 917 7040
Fax 04 917 7059

Auckland office
Level 5, AMI House
63 Albert Street, Auckland 1010
Phone 09 970 1700

Email
enquiries@nzfamilies.org.nz

Commission website
www.nzfamilies.org.nz

The Couch website
www.thecouch.org.nz