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What helps and hinders learning in alternative education?

Rethinking Learning in Western Australia

A discovery report by TACSI in partnership with the Innovation Unit



**RETHINKING
LEARNING**



**Innovation
Unit**

tacsi

THE AUSTRALIAN
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL
INNOVATION

What helped

"In the Behaviour Centre I was able to go into work experience, do courses on-line. I got to choose what I wanted to do. More kids would learn if they had choices in school."

– Learner

"It's good that we have Tim (teacher). We are kept in the loop."

– Parent

"I'll be back no matter what happens I will be there for you tomorrow."

– Teacher

What hindered

"In mainstream I was just handed a worksheet and told to get on with it."

– Learner

"If you weren't safe, would you want to come to school and learn, I wouldn't. Learning would be the last thing I'd be thinking about."

– Teacher

"It was like watching him take his first steps into prison."

– Parent

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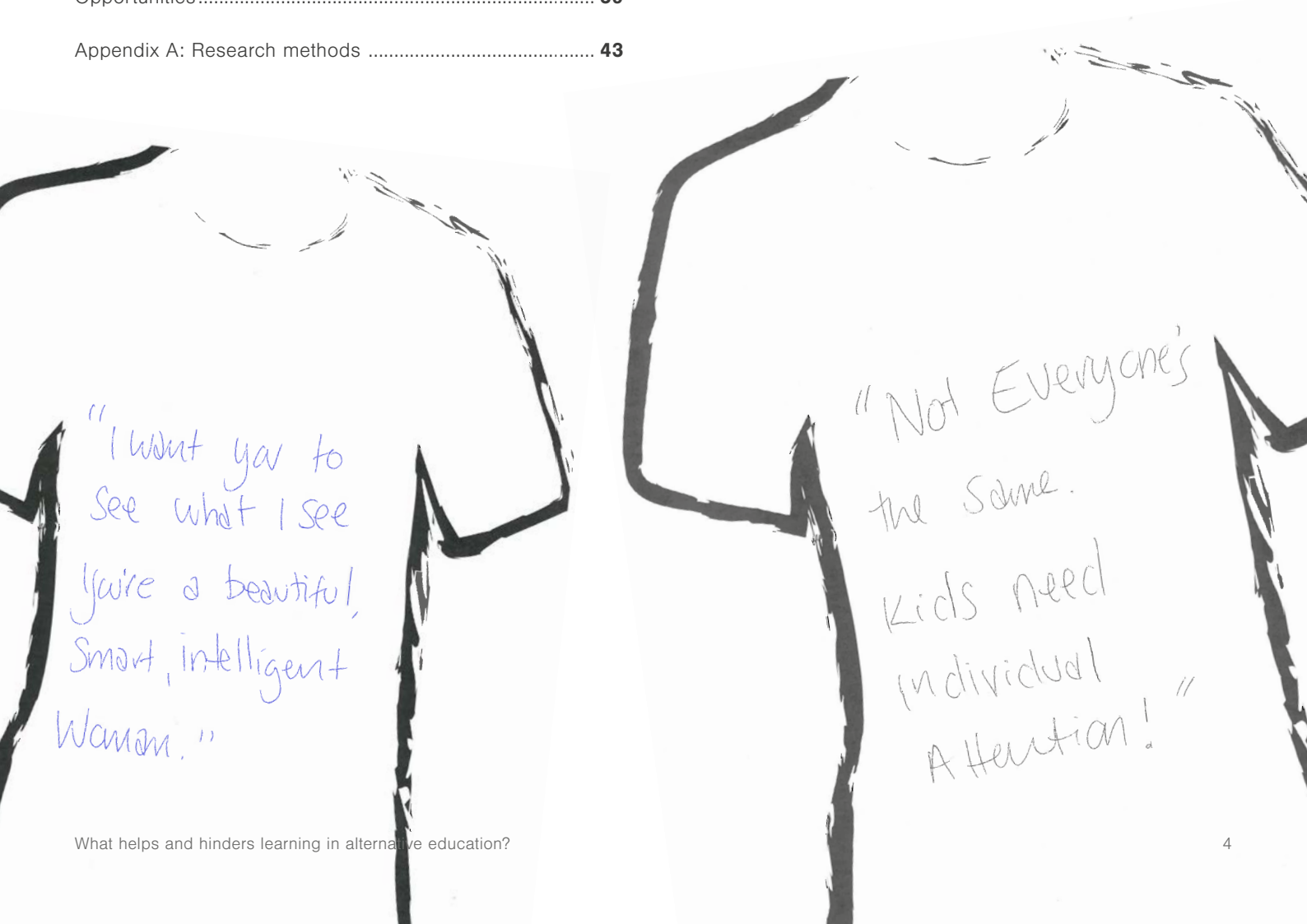
**Report by The Australian Centre
for Social Innovation (TACSI).**

**TACSI would like to thank all the
learners, parents and teachers who
participated in this project and
shared their stories with us.**

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Executive Summary

Project Background

The Department of Education (Department) in Western Australia has previously implemented a range of learning options through alternative education centres to increase support for students with specific learning needs and talents, and to engage those wanting to learn outside of the system. Over time, these centres became increasingly focused on behaviour management and learning outcomes have become difficult to measure.

In late 2015 the Department, informed by a number of reviews, decided to change the purpose of these centres to have a stronger focus on relevant learning outcomes for disengaged, at-risk and behaviour challenged students. Known now as Engagement Centres, these centres include an outreach support service for mainstream schools and other alternative education settings. Alongside this change is the trial of a learning academy, which is linked to the

Big Picture Education Australia model. The philosophy underpinning this model focuses on educating 'one student at a time' and creating personalised education programs unique to each student'. Introduced to Australia from the United States in 2006, the purpose of Big Picture Education is to re-shape public schools around partnerships with support services and communities to offer learning that is blended with personalised courses and community based experiences. Study programs are personalised by students, parents, teachers and mentors. This integrated learning framework is seen to be highly effective in improving student learning outcomes².

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) was engaged by the Innovations Unit to conduct ethnographic interviews with learners, parents, and teachers to unearth the different perspectives and experiences of what helped and hindered learning.

¹ <http://www.bigpicture.org.au/about-us/big-picture-education-australia>

² *Ibid*

Who we are

Every year, billions of dollars are spent on social services and cycles of reform, yet we see limited impact for those who need it most. **TACSI** is The Australian Centre for Social Innovation. We partner with government, not-for-profits, philanthropy and business to develop, test and spread innovations that change lives for the people who need it most.

At the heart of TACSI is the fundamental belief that people are the experts in their own lives and the most effective innovations come from working alongside the people who face the very challenges we're trying to solve.

The **Innovation Unit** develops radically different, better and lower cost public services at scale. Some organisations develop radical ideas. Some drive large-scale change. To fulfil our mission, we must do both. We are innovation experts - a collaboration of public service practitioners, designers and researchers working with people who use and deliver services to develop life-changing solutions to social challenges.

Co-design research

As part of our co-design research, TACSI conducted ethnographic interviews, which involved listening to, observing and learning from people in their context. Semi-structured interviews with learners, parents and teachers gained their perspective on what helped and hindered learning. We also developed a number of tools and activities that supported this process.

We identified four main themes from the analysis; learning support, transitions, complexities at home and learning environment that each has aspects that helped and hindered learning.

What Helped

We heard that 1:1 support and small group learning, an on-site psychologist as part of the teacher team, mentors, learning choice and pathways, chill out areas and having a teacher listen and understand helped learning. We were told these created confident and successful learners.

What Hindered

We heard that suspension, reputation, the transition between primary and secondary school or back to mainstream school, not understanding the complexities at home affecting learners, information about learners not being communicated between teachers or schools, teachers not having time for training and parents not knowing about learning pathways available to their children hindered learning.

Opportunities to explore

Through our research we discovered some initial opportunities that can be further explored and defined through the co-design workshops that will follow this research. We found that a concept called GRIT which recognises the value of the non-cognitive skills of learners, the Circle of Courage, a youth development model used by some teachers, and a dedicated psychologist as part of the teacher team could be trialled and test, or 'prototyped' at the Learning Academy and Engagement Centres. 'Prototyping' enables us to test possible solutions with people on a small-scale first to see what could work and what may not. Because it is an iterative process there are 'loops' of opportunities to learn and refine a potential solution before it is rolled out.

We acknowledge there may be many other opportunities that are already known and being explored which we are unaware of, but would encourage policy makers and leaders in the education system to consider and build further research and testing of opportunities using the themes identified in this report as a starting point.

Project Approach

Co-design research

The Department identified fifteen people including learners, parents and teachers for TACSI to conduct semi-structured interviews with to gain their perspective on what helped and hindered learning. We used an ethnographic research approach, which involves listening to, observing and learning from people in their context – a rigorous form of hanging out.

We met with six learners, three parents and six teachers. The sample size for co-design research is deliberately small to enable depth. Co-design research does not look to uncover ‘the truth’ in the same way as large-scale quantitative research. Instead, its aim is to uncover actionable starting points and acts as a compliment to large-scale research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with learners in their home and at school. We spoke with current learners, those disengaged from school and a young person who had successfully completed their schooling through a Behaviour Centre. We used picture and card sorting activities to explore each of their perspectives on issues that helped and hindered their learning, and to describe their experience. We also developed tools specific to this project and ran an activity that gave learners the opportunity to tell us about their ideal or not-so-ideal teacher.

Another tool gave learners a chance to create a t-shirt slogan. Learners could convey one thing they thought teachers should know about them or what they saw themselves doing in 5-10 years. This tool gave us an opportunity to hear their aspirations and stories about learning. Further details on our methods can be found in Appendix A.

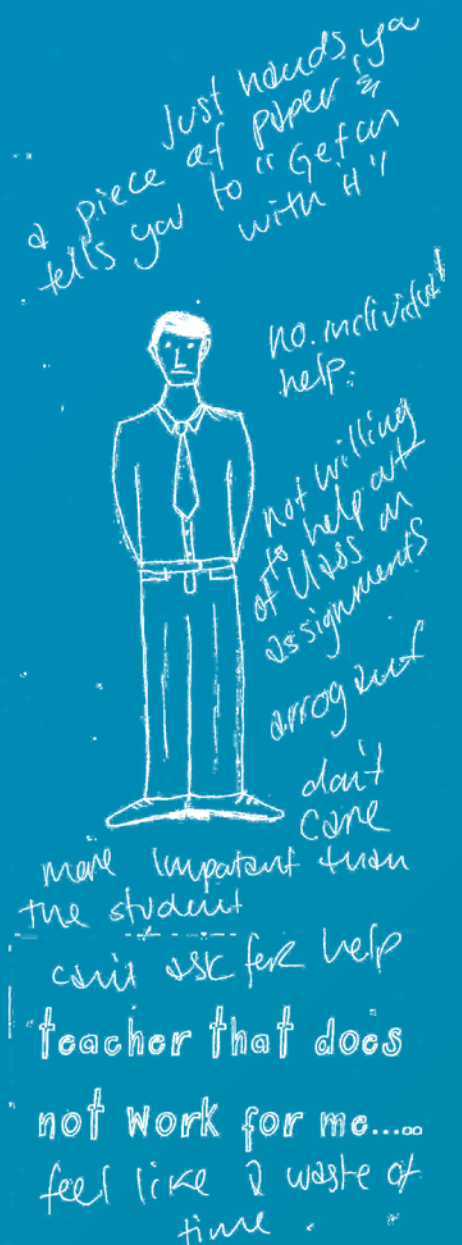
We conducted semi-structured interviews with parents in the school context and in their home, sharing a take-away meal with them and their family. We used a card sorting activity to explore their perspective on what helped and hindered learning for their children and to explore issues and circumstances that affected their ability to support learning at home. Undertaking this process outside of the school context filled a gap in understanding the interactions affecting learning for young people and what happens before they walk through the school gate, and when they leave. Parents were also encouraged to create a T-shirt slogan. They were asked to write one thing they would tell their children or child to encourage their learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers in the school context. We interviewed those working with aspirant Aboriginal learners, supporting learners in outreach situations (in mainstream schools) and teachers working with current learners in a Behaviour Centre. We used picture and card sorting activities to explore their perspectives on issues that helped and hindered student learning. Teachers also completed the T-shirt activity telling us one thing about themselves they wanted to share with their students or one thing to encourage student learning.

Stories from people we met



what they bring
out in me....



Ketan / Learner



Ketan is 18 years old and doesn't like being around groups of people because they make him feel really anxious. He is better now than he used to be. Before, he would put his earphones in and pull his hood over his head. He doesn't really trust anyone.

Ketan came to the Behaviour Centre when mainstream education no longer worked for him. He used to sit in class and the teacher would hand him a worksheet and say, 'Get on with it!' This didn't work for him. He understood the teacher had a lot of other students in the class but he just didn't work that way.

He felt like there was no individual attention and no willingness to help out on an assignment outside of class time. It felt to him like some teachers didn't care, they were arrogant, like they thought more of themselves than the students.

To Ketan school felt like a waste of time. He used to sit at school and do nothing. He started feeling depressed and anxious and teachers would make him angry. If he didn't understand the school work or join in the class he would be asked to sit outside the classroom, which he did a lot of the time. Sometimes he would then just walk home.

When he came to the Behaviour Centre it was good. He thought the teachers there understood so much. They were willing to change the way they taught. They understood that he was a visual learner and they spent 1:1 time with him. They were willing to sit down and talk with him about what was happening at home. The psychologist there was someone he could go and talk to if he didn't want to talk to a teacher. They were like family.

When he got angry they would give him space and they always let him know they were there for him when he calmed down. Sometimes they even talked to Ketan outside of school hours.

Now that Ketan has left the Behaviour Centre he wants others to know how good the place is. He still hasn't found work but he wants to become a baker. He knows this would be good for him because he can work early in the kitchen, not be near too many people and then go home to support his family.

Jenny / Parent

Jenny is a single parent with seven children ranging from 14-34 years of age. Her youngest three struggled at school. After the birth of these children her partner started going in and out of prison. They are currently separated because of his stay in prison.

At the same time, her older children moved away and she had little support when things went down hill at school.

Jenny started to go to the local gym as a bit of a release. They noticed she was good at helping other people with their routine and offered her a job at the gym. This was her first 'real' job. Not long after, the phone calls from school started and her kids kept getting suspended. Being the only one who could pick them up ended with Jenny getting fired from her job.

A good day is getting the kids out the door to school and that can be a battle, which is why the constant suspensions get annoying. Jenny feels like she's done her job, fighting the battle to get them there just to then have them sent home.

Jenny's children struggle in different ways. One has dyslexia and has recently been in jail, another struggles with an addiction, and another is in the 'wrong crowd'. Until recently all three went to different Behaviour Centres, which made it hard with commuting and dealing with different teachers.

One of her sons had his first meeting at the school the other day and Jenny was very worried because the building was all locked up. She thought to herself, 'I'm watching you take your first steps into prison, just like your Dad.'

Jenny says she is illiterate which makes it hard for her to help her children learn. She's never told her children this. She's 'fudged' her way through life with them the same way she thinks she's fudged her way through her education. This can be challenging, especially when the school wants everything in writing. This got harder when her older children left home because they helped the other children with their homework. Jenny knows she relied on them heavily to help with this.

Jenny knows her children are smart. They have problems but that doesn't mean they aren't academic. Her two eldest children get through work really quickly, if anything she wonders if they are bored. She hopes her children know that she thinks they can achieve anything they put their minds to.

She would love them to finish school so they can feel proud.



Sophie / Teacher



Sophie has been working at the Behaviour Centre for six years. Her team focuses on a Year Ten withdrawal program for students withdrawn from mainstream schooling. The program is delivered to small groups of learners, no more than 6-8 students and sometimes 1:1. She works with a great team, and not in isolation. The right team is important and the role of the Youth Transition Officers and the psychologist are crucial to their work.

It's important to her team that students are given choice in their learning including options like going to TAFE, finding work or going back to mainstream education. Where the students go is where they are likely to have the most success.

Her team gets to know the families of learners quite well and consider their interaction a partnership. Sophie believes communication is vital to the success of their students. They get to know families beyond the scope of what a normal teacher would, taking students to job interviews and sometimes court appointments.

The team relies on each other to establish and understand boundaries so they know when to draw the line. She finds that not understanding these boundaries can lead to burn out.

Sophie thinks that mainstream schools have a limited understanding about what is done at a Behaviour Centre. Sometimes when a student returns to mainstream school she hears, 'Hmmm they haven't been fixed?' She sees outreach as a valuable service that can support and guide teachers, her team can act 'like a bridge' between student and teacher.

The biggest thing she has learnt is not to teach a kid to swim when they are drowning. Not to teach when things are escalating and to wait and find the 'teachable moments'. It is important to her that teachers understand these moments and provide options for student to manage their behaviour.

For Sophie, the most important thing is that students leave the Behaviour Centre and go on to live healthy and helpful lives, equipped with a toolbox of skills to deal with whatever life throws at them.

Project Findings

A number of themes and insights were derived from the semi-structured interviews and activities. Themes were developed by identifying reoccurring words, phrases and patterns of conversation and then grouped and analysed. These gave us an idea about some of the things that help and hinder students' learning and how families and teachers can support and facilitate learning.

Many of the experiences shared about learning are linked and nuanced. To better understand these connections we looked at the possible **influencing factors** that lead to particular **interactions**, what people then **felt** and **thought** about these interactions and the end **result**. Opportunities to be investigated as part of the next steps in the co-design process have also been highlighted.

Themes

- Learning support
- Transitions
- Complexities at home
- Learning environment



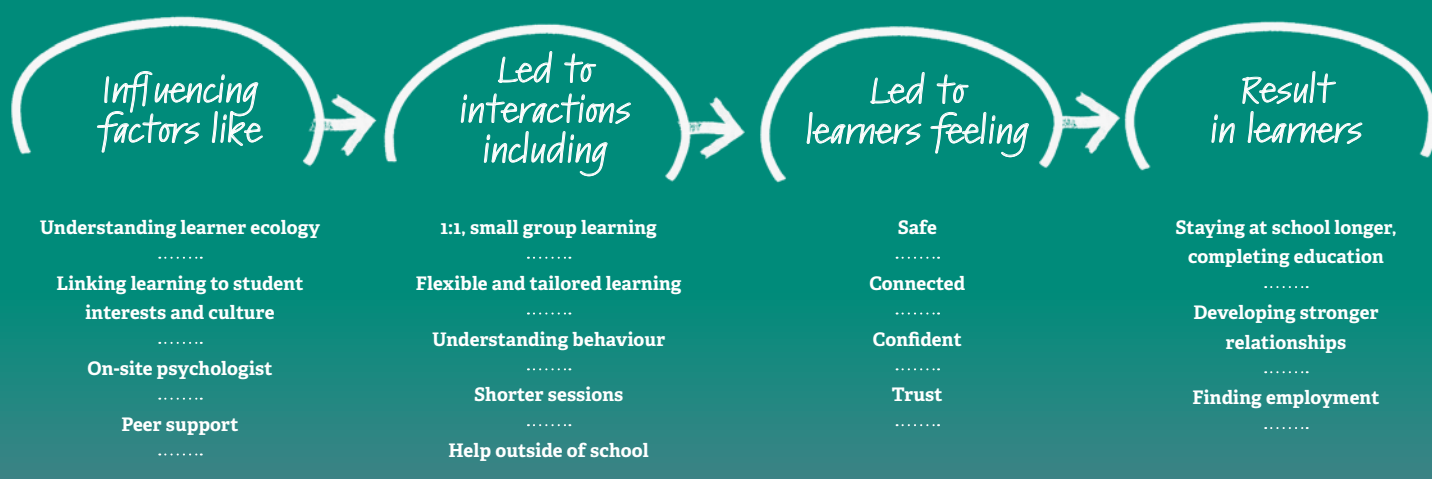


Theme 1 / Learning support

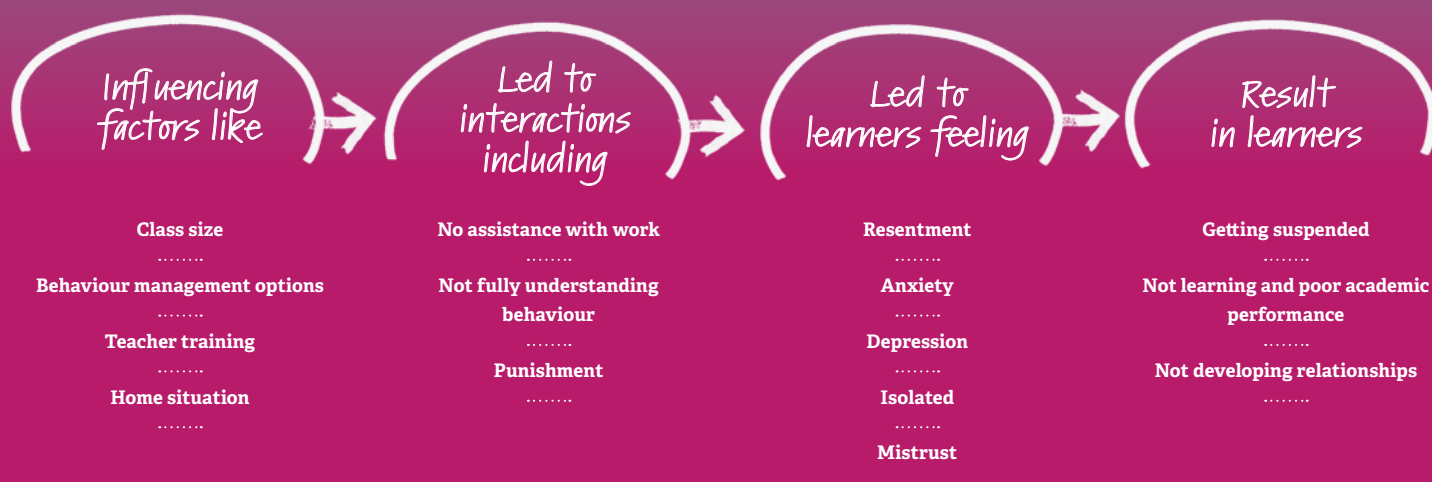
What worked for learners, parents and teachers was a flexible approach to learning. This was thought to create a positive impact on behaviour management and learning outcomes, especially when learning occurred in 1:1 support scenarios or small groups. Psychologists played a pivotal support role to help learners manage their behaviour, build connections and trust, and to guide and support teachers and parents.

Learning support for **learners**

What helped learners



What hindered learners



For learners, having a choice about what and how they learn, getting 1:1 support and having their behaviour understood was what helped them to stay in school or take another learning or employment pathway.

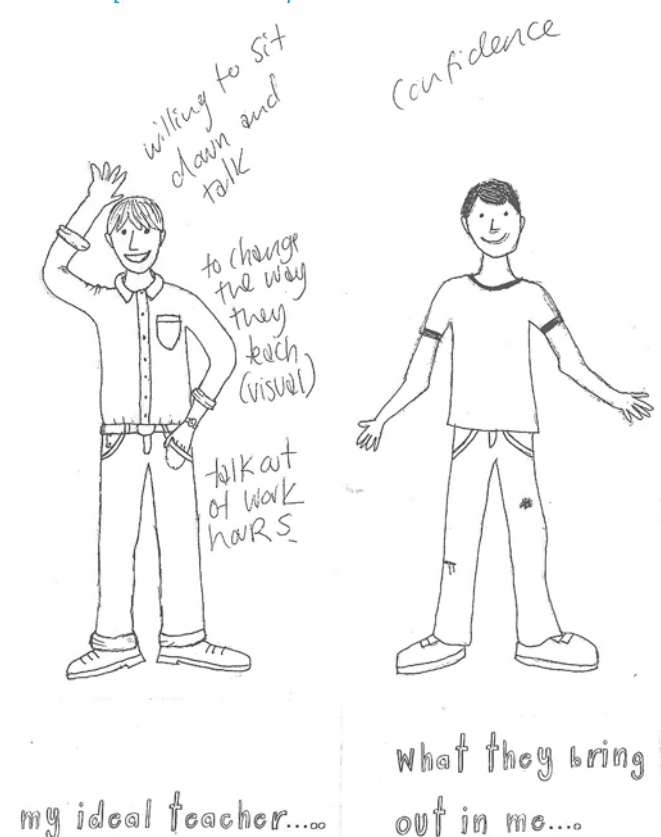
"In the Behaviour Centre I was able to go into work experience, do courses on-line. I got to choose what I wanted to do. That was really important to me. More kids would learn if they had choices in school."

This contrasts with their experience in mainstream school, where students felt they were just handed work and told to get on with it.

"In the mainstream school, the teachers are not helpful. You get given a piece of paper and told what to do. I'd sit there not knowing what to do and just get anxious and angry because the teacher didn't have time. Then I'd just go and sit outside by myself or walk home."

An 'ideal teacher' for learners was someone who talked to them and listened and took the time to help with learning. These teachers also gave learners their space when they were 'having a moment' and didn't judge them for it.

"If I was feeling anxious and needed to get outside, that was okay. They'd (teacher at the Behaviour Centre) come outside, ask me if I was okay and if they could help. And it was alright if I just needed some space and a bit of a break."



"The ideal teacher is willing to teach you in different ways and to talk out of school. I'm a visual learner. They give me confidence."

We heard from teachers that school psychologists have supported learners to build better relationships and a degree of trust with their peers and teachers. For one learner, they believed that,

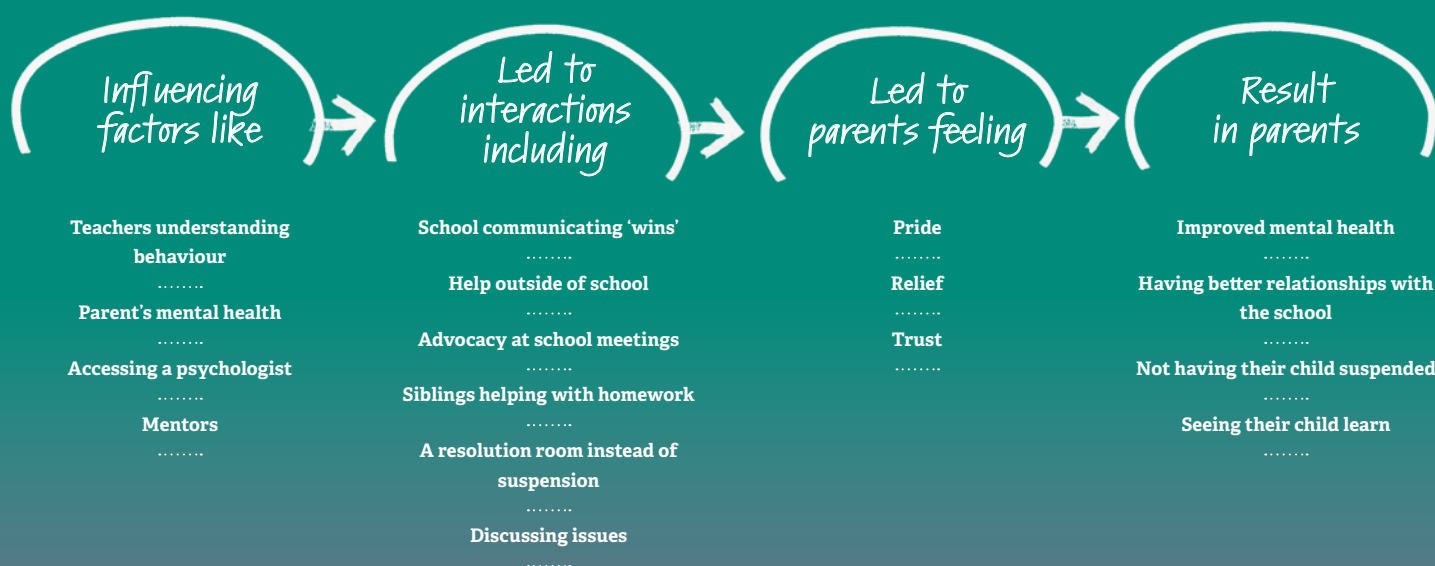
"This support has helped me to finish school and get my General Certificate of Adult Education."

We observed a conversation between two learners about their friendship and being able to trust each other to share stories about family experiences. We also observed the bond between a learner and the school psychologist as they greeted each other and hugged after having not seen each other for some time. This learner was described as being disconnected when they first came to the Behaviour Centre, hiding behind their hooded sweater and blocking out the world with headphones. They have now successfully completed school and are slowly developing friendships and trust.

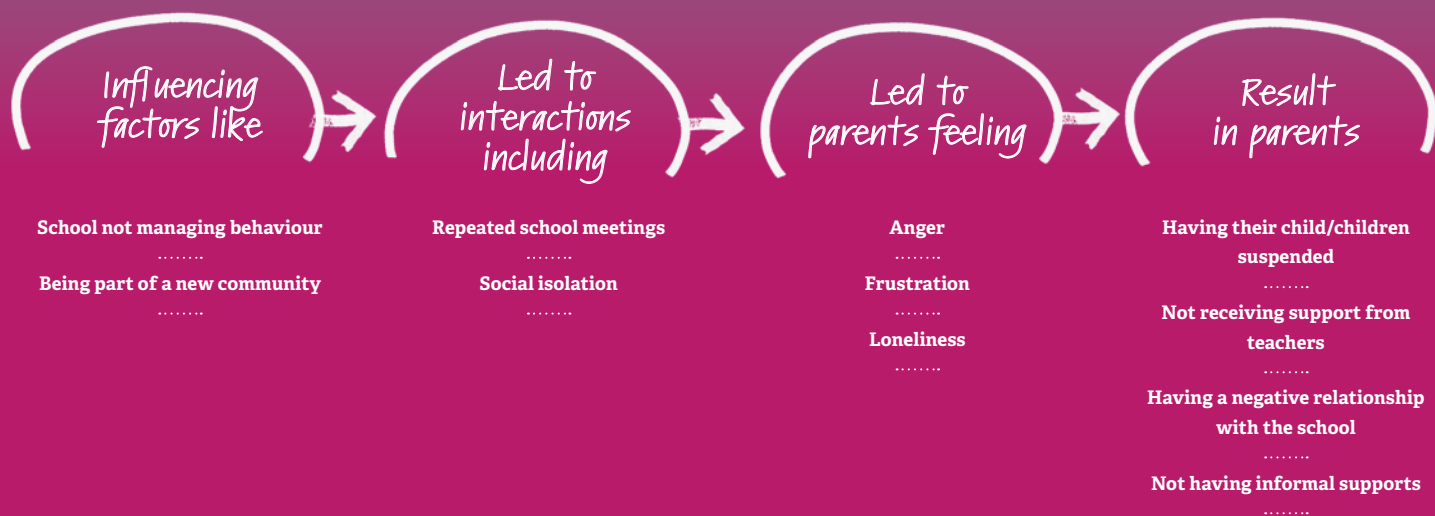


Learning support for **parents**

What helped parents



What hindered parents



The parents we spoke to also agreed that individualised support was better for managing their child's behaviour and supporting their learning. One parent thought that

"without the type of support we get from the staff at the Behaviour Centre, I can honestly say that without them coming on board to help my son, he wouldn't have finished Year 10 and he would have been in and out of the judicial system."

There was a degree of understanding too about the ability of teachers in mainstream schools to manage behaviour when class sizes are large.

"Class size is a big issue in mainstream schools. There are too many kids. You can't be too harsh on the teachers though. And she (daughter) was a bit of a nightmare."

Rather than hearing from teachers when their child was 'bad', parents also wanted to hear the 'good' news.

"I never get good news from anyone, its always bad news."

"I only hear from them when he's done something wrong."

Receiving a phone call or an invitation to come to the school when their child has progressed or had a good day was an experience for one parent they appreciated.

"Yeah, Beatrice used to call and let me know when my son had a good day. She always asked what was beneficial for him. It helped."

Balancing conversations about learners' good and not so great days seem build the confidence and trust of parents in the school and in their child to learn.

"That's my hope for them, that they will be educated and that they will trust in themselves to finish school."

The ideal teacher parents envisaged for their children also had similar traits to what learners described.



"An ideal teacher is one that takes the time to understand and who can help out of school. That was useful for my son. This brought out his confidence. He previously didn't have confidence in schoolwork. His ability to learn was improved and he improved his social level. He learnt to engage with people a bit better."

The teacher as a mentor was an experience for one parent who thought this helped improve her son's wellbeing.

"They're like a mentor for him, the teachers took the time to get to know him and like him, and that made my son and I happy."

Parents thought that if teachers had more support and were able to understand their child's behaviour, they would probably not issue as many suspensions.

"Teachers in the mainstream could do with more than one teacher support aid in a class. They just keep suspending. Suspension after suspension, it's wrong. School work suffers, they get behind. But there's no other alternative in mainstream school."

Not understanding triggers, like health problems, and their impact on learners was also thought to hinder their participation in learning.

"There was little support for John's anxiety like with things like events he would not decide to go until the last minute, as he would have to work himself up. But when he did decide at the last minute he was told no, too late. It felt like they didn't want him to engage."

One parent observed a 'resolution room' used as an alternative for suspension.

"They didn't have suspensions they had a resolution room. There would be a problem they would take both parties into the resolution room. The next day they would discuss what would happen. This actually helped his learning."



Having siblings help with homework and around the house was a support for parents who struggled with their own learning difficulties and for parents managing children who experienced ADHD or drug problems.

"She helps out a lot. She's a great support because sometimes I find it hard to get moving in the morning because of my panic attacks, and dealing with my son's ADHD and my other son who has a meth addiction is a lot. He is quite disruptive to the family."

"I can give advice, but I can't really help with homework. I barely finished Year 10 and wonder if I'm dyslexic. My older kids are good with helping them with their homework."

Bigger class sizes in mainstream schools were seen to hinder learning. Some parents felt that learners would sit in class not knowing what to do. They also thought these learners didn't feel confident enough to seek help because they were embarrassed about what they didn't understand. Other parents felt that learning just didn't happen in the mainstream and that learners need choices and relevant subjects.

"I don't want him to go back to mainstream school. When he's there he doesn't learn."

"Kids learn from doing; hands on doing. If this was the style of learning kids would just blow it, they'd be so good at it! Kids need more choice, more options to try."

"NAPLAN is ridiculous! It's not fair to put pressure on kids to show whether schools are doing a good job or not."

Liaising with a school psychologist was an interaction parents felt helped them support their children in school. In one circumstance, the psychologist was seen as an advocate.

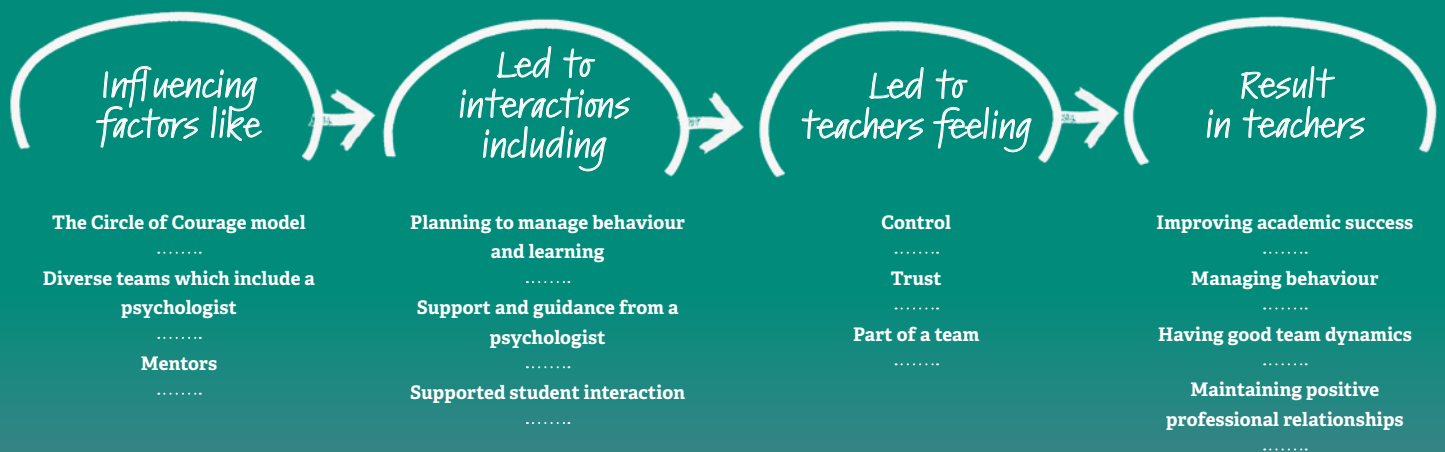
"I felt like I was getting pushed to send my child to the Behaviour Centre or else she'd get expelled. The psychologist stood up for me and said to the other teachers you're bullying her a bit."

Accessing a psychologist outside of the school setting helped another parent manage issues impeding their ability to support their children's behaviour and learning. At the end of an interview, one parent disclosed,

"I feel lonely, I really feel lonely. I'm not as connected to the community here and moving around, like when we were homeless, has not really help that. Yeah, I do feel lonely."

Learning support from **teachers**

What helped teachers



What hindered teachers





1:1 support and tailored learning content gave teachers a better way to understand and manage behaviour to then support learning. One group of teachers use the Circle of Courage, a youth development model which looks at four growth needs for children: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

“This model has always been really helpful to understand the needs of the students. Some of them might be quite academic, but lack social skills. They may lack generosity and that’s something we can work on.”

The Circle of Courage has also helped teachers reinforce their approach with young people to support their emotional growth and learning.

“Our first priority is connections and creating mutually respectful bonds. Respect to the child, the situation, culture and needs and we mirror this back to the child. This creates a gradual build up of trust.”

Mentors were also a part of student learning success. In one case, a mentor connected learners to their cultural identity through dance and performance activities which improved their confidence, behaviour and learning to see them progress onto university and forming their own business.

“These four boys were influenced by the elder Jim. They got an identity and pride about who they are. We saw a complete change in them.”

Some teachers found it difficult to find time to plan and tailor specific learning especially since the latest system change. The absence of an on-site psychologist and recent staff changes that diminished team diversity were believed to hinder their ability to manage behaviour.

“I really miss the support of the psychologist and getting advice from them. The change to the structure at the end of 2015 has been difficult. We’ve lost our old team. We’ve got all teachers now. We’re currently getting used to the new staff. It’s also been hard for the kids who are testing the new staff. It was really good when we had a psychologist on site all the time and educational assistants and youth workers who would support us.”

Other teachers who had a psychologist as part of their team thought,

“He is key to the team. We are a linked team. If we didn’t have him, we would struggle and so would the students.”

Time constraints, partly due to increased school hours, also hindered some teachers’ learning.

“I’d love to have time to go to a course. I don’t have the time for them. I am the lynchpin here. I have to be here.”

“It’s intense with these kids. The structural change has increased the time the kids are to be at school. The previous time was 9am-1pm, now we need to keep them here til 3. The time change doesn’t suit the students’ attention spans and learning. The staff have more difficulty with students, they’re tired.”

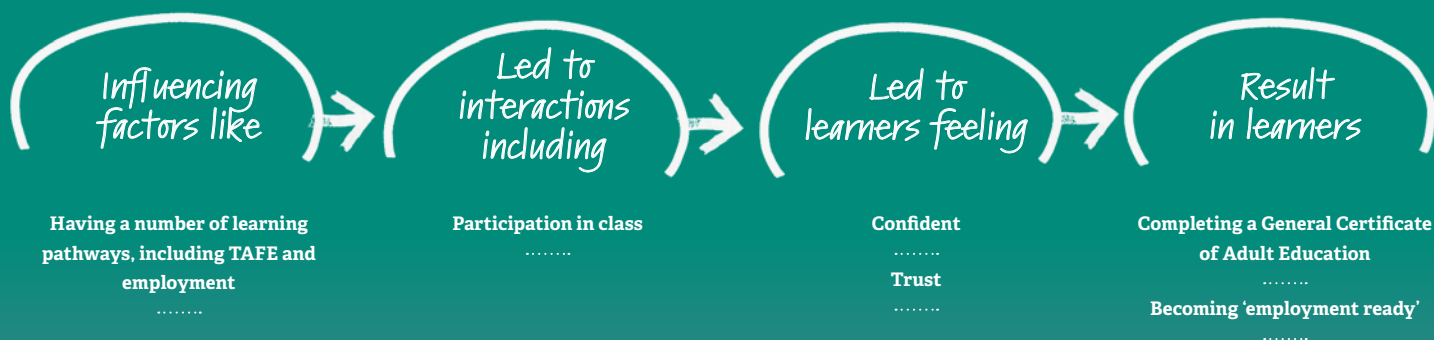


Theme 2 / Transitions

Learners can experience various transition points in their education that can be exciting and challenging. Consistent communication points and exchanges, system changes inclusive of learners', parents' and teachers' needs and learning options contribute to circumstances that can help learning.

Transitions for **learners**

What helped learners



What hindered learners





Whether it was the choice of going back to mainstream education – and being ready for this or going on to TAFE or employment, knowing there were transition options helped learners get through.

“When I was at the Behaviour Centre I did a gaming course. I was really interested in it and thought I might do it after school – get into gaming as a job.”

But moving from primary to high school ‘sucked’ for one learner because they felt that high school was

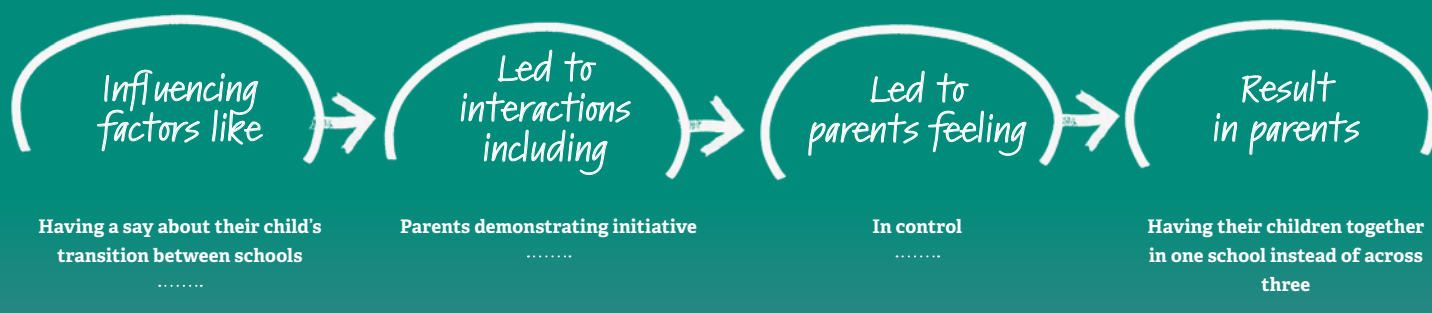
“bigger and you don’t know anyone and you don’t get help. I got into a lot of fights when I came there. I wanna stay here. I don’t wanna go back to mainstream.”

When we explored this further with the learner, it was the direct support to help with learning and a smaller class size in primary school that was missing from their high school experience. For another learner, they were excited to return to ‘mainstream’ schooling because this was where most of her friends were.

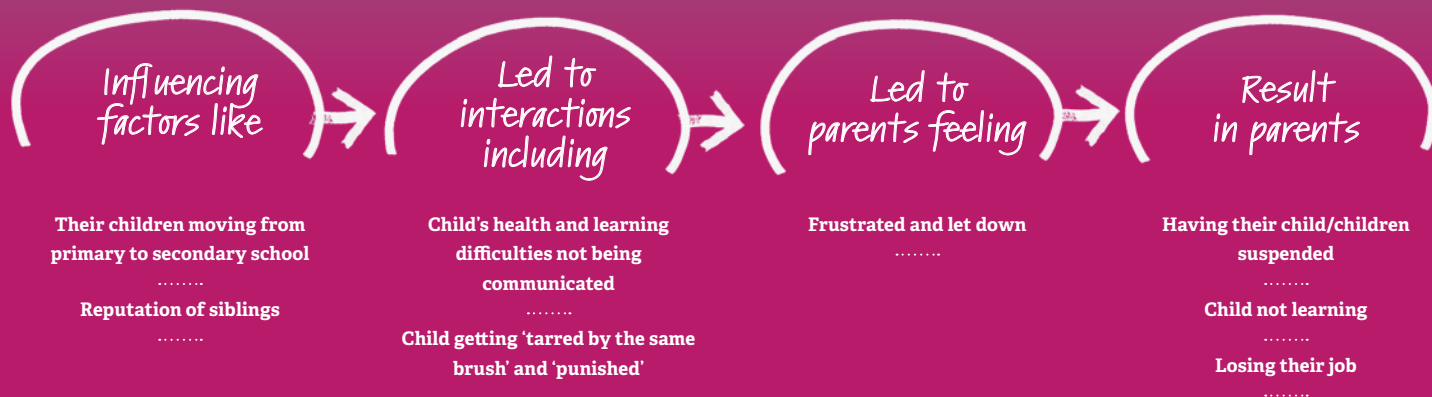
“I can’t wait to go back there, I’ve been waiting six months to get back in. I’m waiting for a place.”

Transitions for **parents**

What helped parents



What hindered parents



Making decisions about their childrens' learning was a breakthrough for one parent who felt frustrated about having children in different schools and feeling they did not have the support to understand the options available for their education.

"I had sourced out Comet myself because both my son and daughter were no longer going anywhere. The education department had not given me any options for them and it was nearly the end of the term so I made an appointment. I took them all there and they (the school) accepted all of them."

Some parents described the transition for their children from primary to secondary school as 'wishing it never happened' with increased behaviour management issues leading to repeated suspensions.

"I took him to the dyslexic foundation and he was diagnosed. He was put into special classes and he got on really well. If I could have left him there for year seven it would have been the best thing in the world but he went straight into high school (and) that was the end of him. I had organised for one teacher to pass on information about his dyslexia to the teacher in high school. I saw the high school teacher one day in the shops and they said they never got the information or knew he was dyslexic. I just felt let down."

A similar frustration was expressed by another parent who felt,

"the kids' issues are not communicated between schools (mainstream to the Behaviour Centre), or when they go from primary to high school. You have to keep going back and telling them (the teachers)."

The reputation of a sibling was another issue affecting the transition from primary to high school.

"We got through primary school, Tammy was coming up and she was doing really well, but because Rob had made a bit of a name for himself, instead of people seeing Tammy as her own person they saw Rob's sister. She was left behind because of this as her brother's behaviour meant that it was taken out on her. With teachers also, the mainstream teachers were very quick to tar her with the same brush. At the beginning of the year instead of just saying hi it was more like 'we know who you are and we are going to keep our eye on you'."

Developing a reputation for past behaviour was also thought to affect a learner's transition from one school to another.

"I did let them know that I thought 10 days (suspension) was too long, especially consecutive ones. It's a long time out of school. It's pointless, it just puts you behind. I felt like they didn't want him there. He was kind of already marked as a problem student when he went from one school to another. But I do believe they would have given him a fair go and at some point you have to take responsibility for yourself."

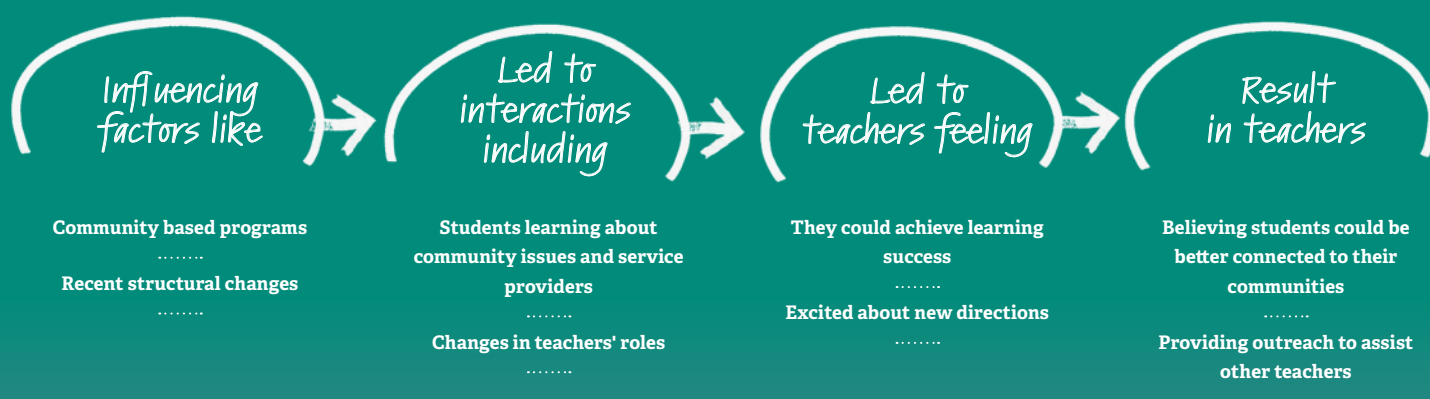


One of the outcomes for these parents was a strain on their employment as they took time off for school meetings. For one parent this meant losing her job.

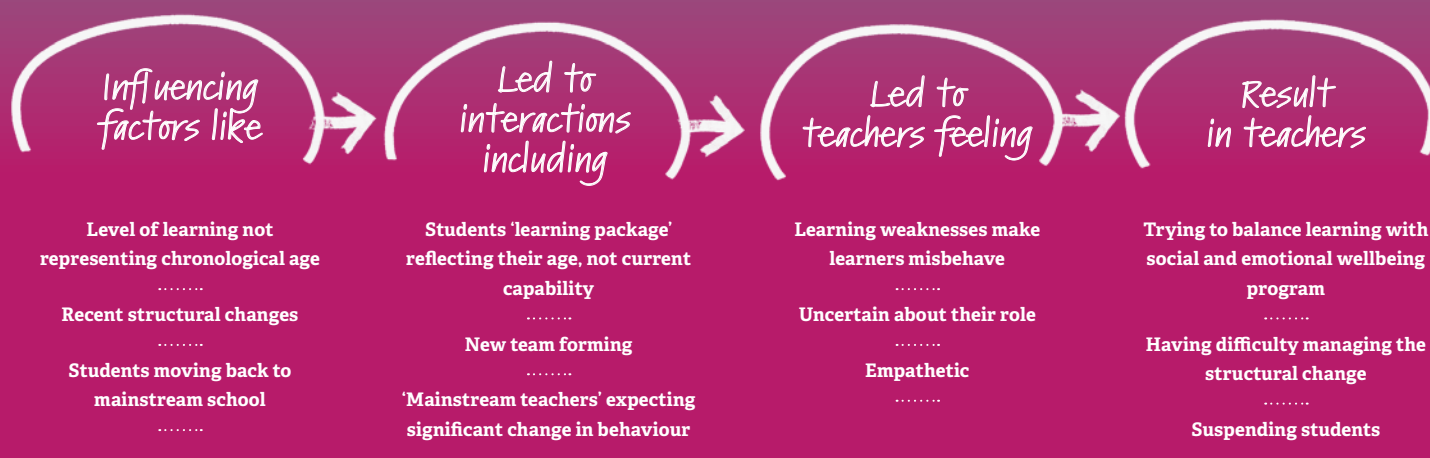
"With the number of phone calls I'd get from the school to come pick them (the children) up or that they were suspended, I ended up getting fired. I enjoyed that job I had."

Transitions for **teachers**

What helped teachers



What hindered teachers



For one teacher, the opportunity for students to learn outside of the classroom was seen as a way students could connect with the broader community.

“There needs to be relevant programs, like camps, or bringing in the fire brigade or other community services. This grounds them (learners) in community and gets them to see what happens out in the world and how their behaviour may affect this.”

The recent education structural reforms were also discussed with undertones of excitement, uncertainty and sadness as a result of role changes and optimism about the new direction and outreach opportunities.

The transition from mainstream schooling to the Behaviour Centre and back also presented some issues thought to hinder learning. Often the learning level of the student did not represent their chronological age. In some cases, this was thought to trigger the initial move to the Behaviour Centre.

“Some of the trouble they’d get into in mainstream school is because they are weak in their learning. They’re weak in some areas. They may be a certain age, but their learning is at a lower level. And rather than be embarrassed about what you don’t know, you create a scene. Then it’s straight to the Principal’s Office or suspension.”

“When we get them, we found that many are below the numeracy and literacy for their chronological age. So we look at that learning, but really focus on the social and emotional wellbeing. When we send them back, the kids still can’t do the work that was sent with them and the learning has already moved on. They’re behind.”

As mentioned previously, some teachers also felt there was an expectation from mainstream teachers that when learners transitioned back they would be ‘fixed’. Part of their work with learners is now about

“building capacity in them to manage the perceptions of different adults when they return to mainstream.”

The move back to mainstream school can also affect the balance of teacher to student ratio in the Behaviour Centre and learning.

“We’ve had a time where we went from having five kids, to one. That was really difficult for the student here as he suffered social awkwardness and he needed social skills and it would have been good to have more students. It can be a bit intense for them and the day needs to be shorter.”

Suspension was also thought by some teachers to be a transition ‘process’ that could significantly hinder learning.

“Suspension happens too much. It’s the bug bear for us. Suspension only works for kids with a good work ethic (to continue learning outside of school). Ten day suspensions are far too long. All that happens is ten days of resentment builds up and the teacher can’t go back to the start of the subject they are teaching. Once they’re suspended, we can’t work with them. Schools often have different philosophies around suspension, but I think, going back to the universal needs model, there needs to be other options. Why can’t the kids do something in the community? Instead of being suspended do something meaningful, mildly therapeutic, something positive - ‘Dog walking’.”

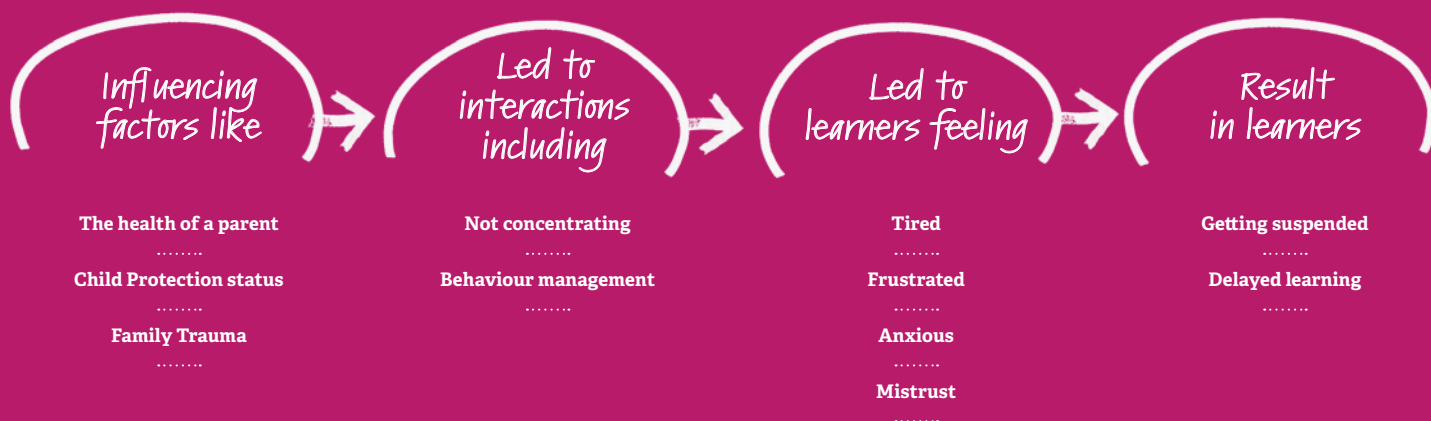


Theme 3 / Complexities at home

During the interviews we found that legal concerns, homelessness, conflict, health issues and drug use were common experiences characterising family life. These complexities were raised by each group and highlighted the significant impact they can have on behaviour and learning. Each group's discussion focused on how home life can hinder learning.

Complexities at home for **learners**

What hindered learners



For some learners, home meant love, family, supporting each other, and a nice place with bedrooms for everyone. It also meant respect.

"My parents deserve my respect because I live under their roof. It's just common sense."

For others, home was characterised by concerns about parental health, restraining orders, family trauma and moving between parents and carers provided by the Department of Child Protection. Whether at home or in care, 'home' was often insecure due to conflict, physical and emotional abuse and tenuous relationships as a result of new partners or siblings. For one learner, their home experience was summed up as,

"Home is bodgie, family is bodgie. I want to come to school to get away from Mum. I've been a DPC kid, most kids here have been, but my carer used to steal my ADHD pills, so I went back to Mum after that."

School has become a safe environment for some learners and a place that represents home.

"I do have a sense of home at school."

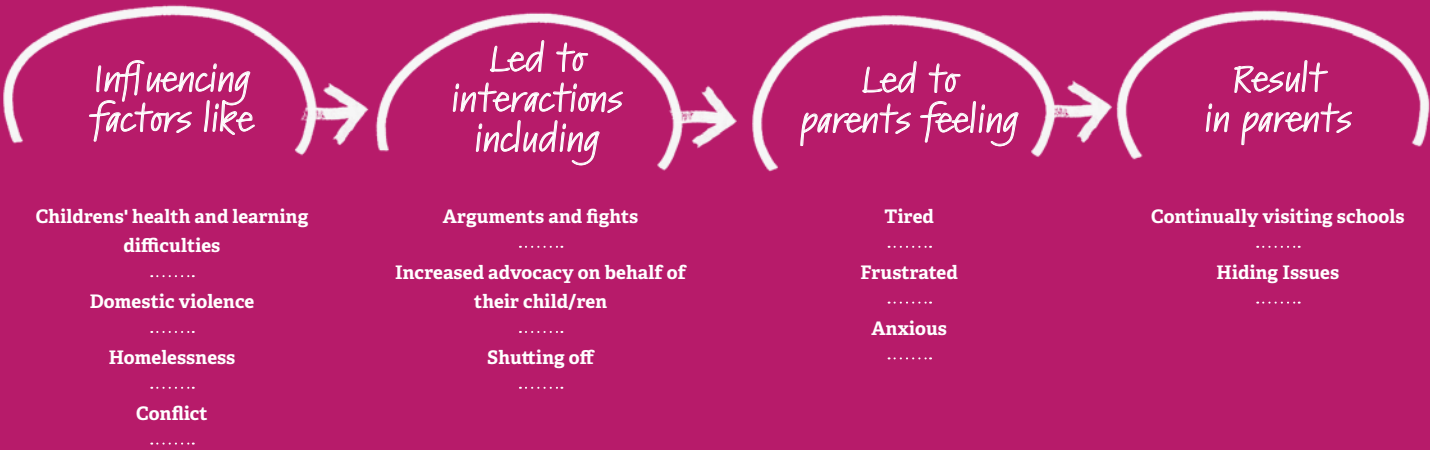
It has also become a place where they release their frustrations and act out.

"Sometimes I feel a bit tired and frustrated. I have trouble getting to bed and I'm slow in the morning, so I'd get into fights sometimes."

Theme 3

Complexities at home for **parents**

What hindered parents



The parents we interviewed cared for several children with varying learning needs and successes, and behavioural and health difficulties. Each parent was an advocate in the way they liaised with schools to negotiate learning choices and behaviour management options, and how they sought external advice and support to challenge suspensions or to get help with books, transport or uniforms for their children.

For some parents, complexities at home involved managing difficult relationships, experiences of domestic violence and trying to hide this from children, and managing childrens' health issues, including drug dependency.

"There is no drug and alcohol rehabilitation for anyone under 18 in this state".

Their own health issues also made it difficult to manage the behaviour of children experiencing ADHD, self-harm and drug addiction.

"Home life is a bit of a struggle, but it's good. We're a family. The ADHD adds an extra thing, extra shouting and wrangling (laughs), but it's managing my other child's addiction to meth which is hard and that affects us all. I'm having trouble getting my daughter to school. She's started

cutting herself. At night, I make sure everyone is in their bedroom before I lock up and then go to bed and take my medication."

Managing behaviour and learning at home has also been a juggle for one parent who experienced periods of homelessness with their children and finding accommodation that was safe, but unsuitable for the number of family members.

"There were five of us sleeping in one room. All the little ones in with me and the eldest in the other bedroom."

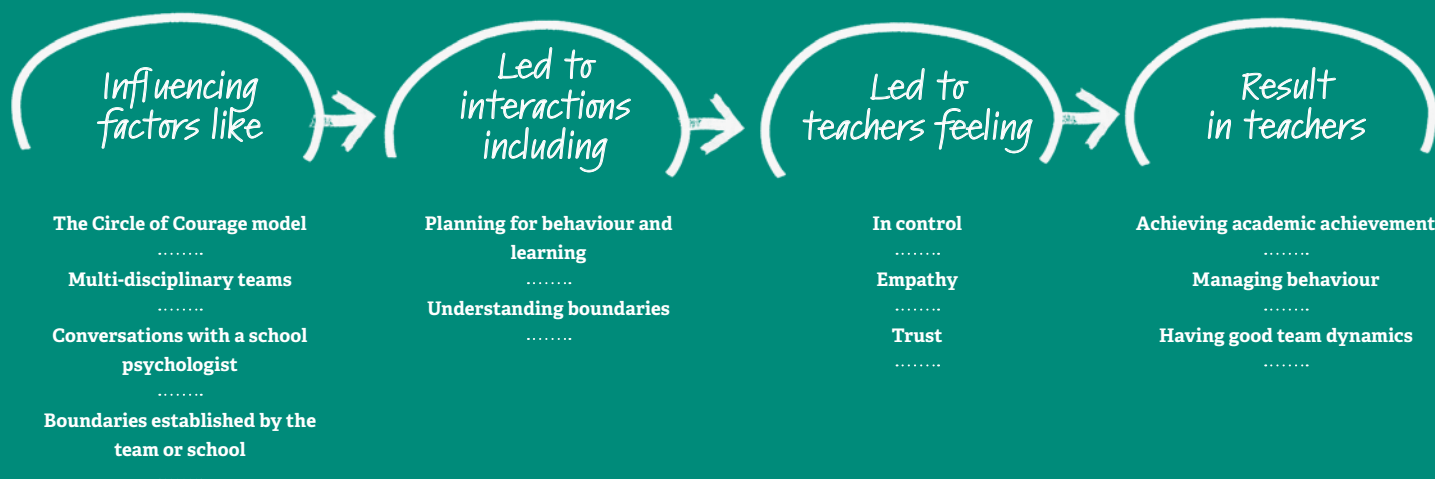
Was learning difficult in this context?

"They were at school. I try and teach my kids everything, help with homework. I have a 'learn with me attitude'. I won't do the work for them, but I'll sit with them and help."

Two parents suggested that a 'regular point of contact' at the school would have helped to build a relationship and ensure information could be easily exchanged about their children with the school.

Understanding complexities at home for **teachers**

What helped teachers



A teacher's knowledge and understanding of the complexities experienced at home by learners and their families appears to be influenced by the:

- Information they receive from the learner, another student, psychologist, or parent
- Assumptions and judgements made based on their personal experiences and understanding
- Training received and understanding about child development; and the
- Boundaries established by the school system, their team or by a teacher themselves, which determined how involved they are in students' lives.

Boundary setting was reinforced in some situations by reference to the expectations of the Department of Education around personal safety,

"If we drop off a student we just go to the driveway, sometimes to the door, but never inside', 'When we do this, we let each other know."

or determined case by case based on the needs of the student.

"We understand the boundaries and the limits, and we understand our role and where we need to draw the line. That's where we bring in other agencies. We hold the team and have good leadership so we know when we are stepping over a boundary."

Regular contact with parents also served to establish familiarity and a two-way flow of communication.

"We get to know the families quite well. Families will let us know when things are going wrong. This takes time to develop the trust. We get to know families by going beyond the scope of what a normal teacher does. We might take them to a job interview or to court."

"Communication (between us and the family) is vital."

Conversations with the school psychologist also shed light on home circumstances that may be affecting a learner's behaviour. We heard that home life for many of the students included fighting with a parent, having to appear before court and going into care. The view was that school was a safe place for the students and the role of the teacher was to keep them safe. The students classified as 'DPC kids' came with

"experiences of abuse at home and in care, and harming themselves by cutting."

Teachers would also become aware of these circumstances directly from the learner affected or from another learner that knew the student.

A teacher who believed that regular contact outside of school with students and their families was integral to learning success, shared a different perspective on boundaries.

"I've formed a good connection with them (students) and their families. I understand them."

"But the sticklers think I'm crossing boundaries."

Working hard, including out of hours, and pushing the boundaries were seen as necessary to better understand learners' behaviour and help them achieve academic success.



Theme 4 / Learning environment

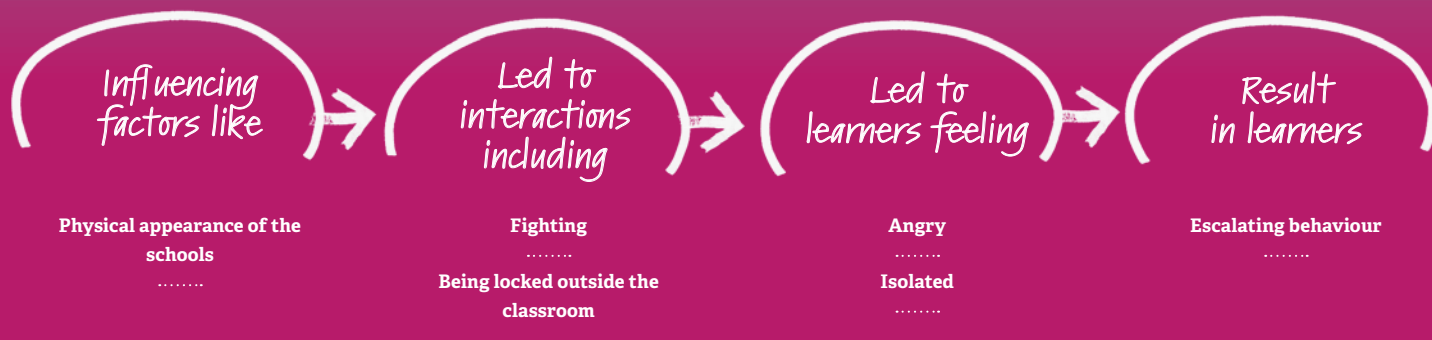
The physical space where learning takes place can help facilitate group interaction, manage behaviour and encourage people to learn. We heard about physical space and interactions that created a welcoming environment and those that looked a bit like a prison setting. Teachers told us about their ideal space for students and what would work for them to manage behaviour.

Learning environment for **learners**

What helped learners



What hindered learners





Time outside to move around and be in the open was a preference of two learners who

"like to look at the sky and play basketball".

Being able to move around and talk 'burnt off some energy'. Going outside of the classroom also worked for another learner who could 'take some time out' to manage their anxiety and anger under the supervision of a teacher. Space to move was important to this learner.

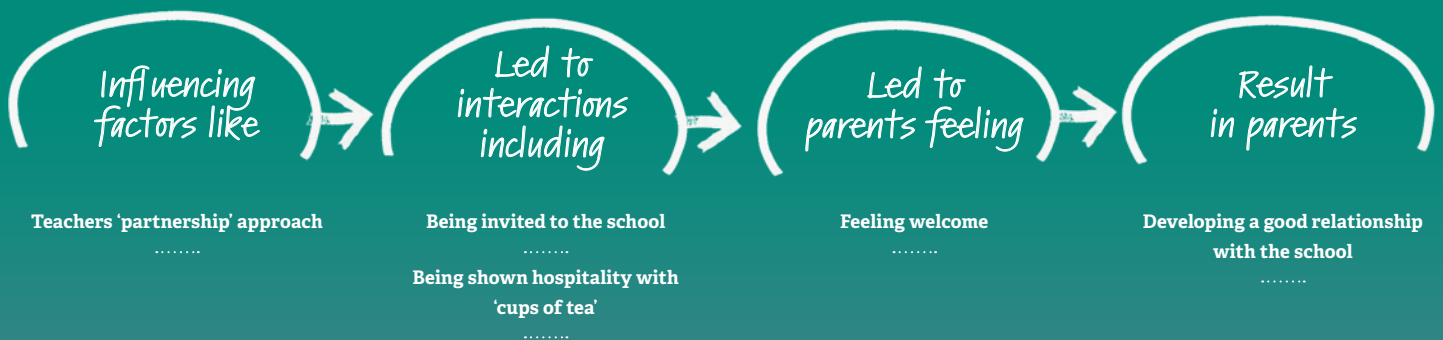
We heard that being outside was also a form of behaviour management or punishment for acting up or not participating. One learner described times when they had sworn and argued with the teacher and got sent outside with the door locked behind them.

"You get locked out, usually for half an hour, even when it's raining and it's hot. The door is locked behind you."

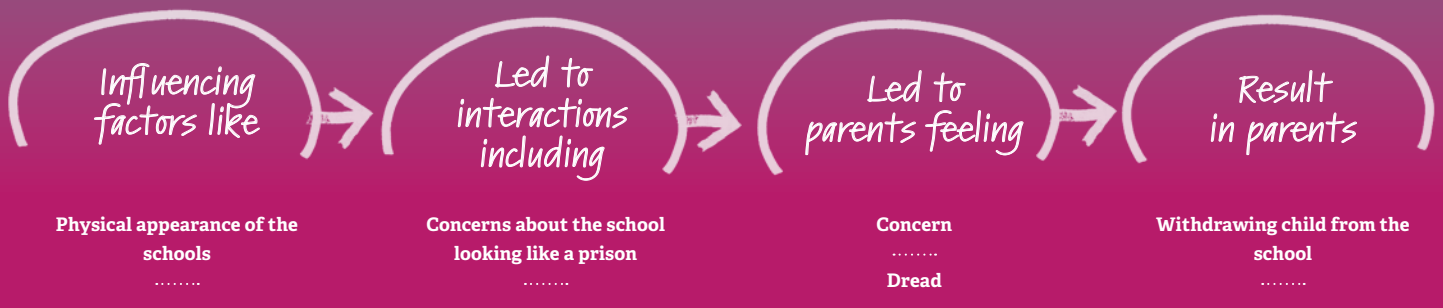
Their response to the separation from the teacher and other students was to punch the door to get back in.

Learning environment for **parents**

What helped parents



What hindered parents



Being invited to the school to celebrate their child's achievements and feeling welcomed through hospitable gestures like a cup of tea, helped parents create a connection with teachers and the school. What some teachers described as a partnership approach with families was echoed by a parent whose experience reflected this.

"Beatrice always kept in contact and let me know how my daughter was going – good and bad. I've always felt welcome to come here. They've treated us really well."

Another parent wished she could be invited to see the work their child did or the activities they participated in.

"I'd like to be invited to the school to see what they (the kids) do, sport, art and stuff. It would be good to be included."

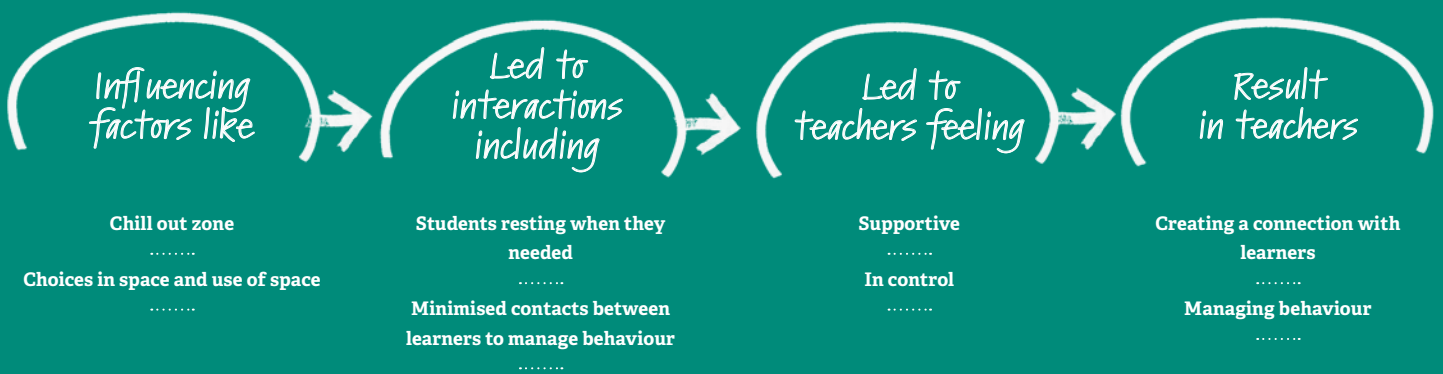
The physical appearance of the school is also important to some parents in terms of how inviting it feels and whether it will be conducive to learning. The impression one parent received when taking their son to a Behaviour Centre was one of dread.

"I went to the Behaviour Centre and I didn't want to put him (my son) there. I think because his father was in prison it felt to me like I was taking him to prison. On my first day there they were locking doors behind us and I thought 'is this the first step he's taking to prison'? Is this where it starts?"



Learning environment for **teachers**

What helped teachers



Building on an existing lounged area to include a bigger chill out zone and having continued access to the basketball hoop were two physical features that some teachers were keen to expand on. These were not only beneficial for learners at the Behaviour Centre, but also for students at the mainstream school.

"We have kids from the mainstream school come over when they want to have a chat or play some basketball to get away from it. Or kids will just come over to talk to Janet (psychologist)."

Being able to lock interconnecting doors was also beneficial for some teachers who managed difficult behaviours and needed to separate learners from each other to prevent fights. The physical environment was not designed as open space to support appropriate monitoring of behaviour with segmented rooms being used for specific activity that helped maintain control. The inclusion of an open space and CCTV and a recorder were thought by one teacher to be a useful inclusion for the protection of both staff and students. Learning was a difficult task in this centre. While it did occur, a lot of teachers' time was also devoted to managing behaviour and violent outbursts.



Opportunities

This research was conducted at a time when the Department of Education in Western Australia initiated a policy shift that includes the trial of a Learning Academy which commenced in 2016, the re-badging of Behaviour Centres as Engagement Centres focused on learning outcomes and outreach services to schools, and the creation of a unified state-wide support service model for schools. We understand this shift has been influenced by a number of reviews and the philosophy of Big Picture Education Australia, which looks to connect schools with support services, mentors and the wider community and create personalised education programs for students.

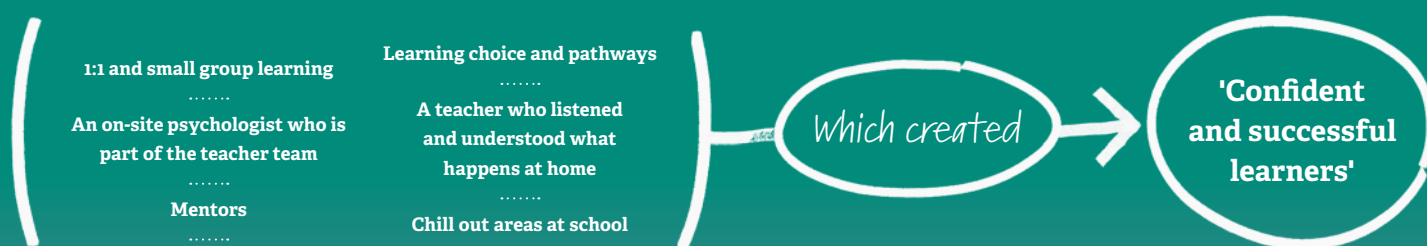
Our co-design research process has discovered some initial opportunities that can be further explored and defined through the co-design workshops that will follow this work. These workshops will delve deeper into these opportunities and unearth others to inform the design of possible solutions which can then be tested. This phase is what we call 'prototyping' which enables us to test possible solutions with people on a small-scale first to see what could work and what may not. Because it is an iterative process there are 'loops' of opportunities to learn and refine a potential solution before it is rolled out.

What we learned

Throughout the interview process, we met educators and parents who are committed to improving the learning opportunities and capabilities of young people despite managing structural changes, behavioural issues and their own professional and personal difficulties. Team support, within the school and family, and advocacy were strong

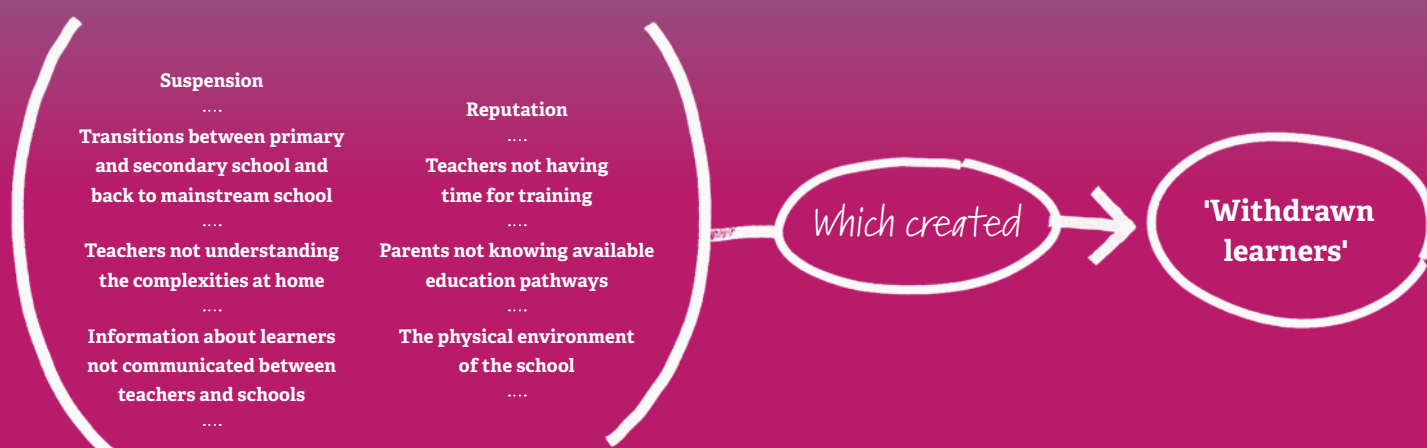
characteristics we observed, as well as the willingness to do the best possible for young learners. We saw the connection learners had with their families and teachers in the centres and appreciated their openness about their behaviour and learning.

We heard that what helped learning included



We also discovered that having a regular contact person or a dedicated psychologist for learners, parents and teachers would be a good opportunity to explore.

We heard that what hindered learning included



We also discovered that understanding the non-cognitive skills of learners through a concept known as GRIT, and using the Circle of Courage model to understand the different facets of youth development, help learning and could be good opportunities to further explore.



What considerations relate to the Learning Academy

Many of the things we heard that helped learning also fit with what is being trialled at the Learning Academy. Learning in small groups is a feature of the trial, but could also include:

- A short-term trial of 1:1 support with established measures to determine the type of personalised support that works.

Pathways that include learning in the community also relate to the internship option offered at the Learning Academy. Connecting young people with a community mentor could also include exploring:

- Ways to improve learners' networks and future employment prospects as part of their personalised learning plans.

The Learning Academy trial offers ways for parents to participate in the development of their child's learning program and the exhibitions of their work. It would be worth exploring with learners, parents and teachers the:

- Type of assessment that would suit learners who experience social awkwardness or anxiety. Public presentation of work would be difficult for these learners if they are expected to verbally present in front of an audience.

We heard there was not a way for learners and parents to regularly share, or be encouraged to share, what is happening at home or details about health or learning difficulties. For some, there had been an opportunity to share details with a school psychologist, who in turn then informs a teacher. Where there was no regular contact or no contact at all with a psychologist, parents found that information about their child did not get passed between teachers. This affected a couple of the learners we spoke to and their transition from primary to secondary school. We suggest considering:

- Ways for regular contact between teachers and parents to occur. One way is to look at an on-going communication process linked to the meetings and updates about learners' education programs. It would also worthwhile exploring other ways that might work with parent and learners.

What considerations relate to the Engagement Centres and outreach

Thirteen Engagement Centres came into operation in 2016 with a stronger focus on relevant and continuous learning for disengaged learners and those severely at-risk. An outreach service will allow teachers in the Engagement Centre to support students withdrawn from learning and those in mainstream school with behavioural issues. Partnership agreements with other services will allow teachers to bring in or refer learners for specialised support.

Teachers in these Centres will be able to assess and individualise learning programs with each learner receiving an Individual Pathway Plan. We also suggest:

- Exploring ways to weave an informed understanding about home complexities into the Plan and linking these to specific teaching strategies.
- Trialling the use of the Circle of Courage. This could inform the pathway plans or be integrated into outreach support and 1:1 support to better understand behaviour and support learning.

One of the main difficulties we heard from teachers was making regular time or just having time for training. We heard that creating space for continuous learning that can be applied to challenge assumptions and perceptions and to build on teaching practices could help manage some behavioural issues and support learning. While not enough is known about the unified statewide support service, we suggest considering:

- Integrating training about the Circle of Courage as part of the 'shared professional learning framework' for all staff.

What considerations relate to both

As part of the Learning Academy trial and in one or more Engagement Centres there is an opportunity to:

- Collectively validate the non-cognitive skills of learners through a concept known as GRIT. This has been integrated into education programs in the United States and Australia and is recognised as a way to understand and measure the impact of non-cognitive skills that allow young people to be persistent, learn from their mistakes and achieve goals³.
- Trial a dedicated on-site psychologist as part of the staff team. We understand this could already be happening at the Learning Academy because of the alignment with the CARE school curriculum, which integrates health professionals to support students and families experiencing issues such as trauma and violence.



Further opportunities

This research was carried out with a small sample of learners, families and educators and as such, the opportunities we have identified are drawn from the things that those people indicated to us worked well, supported their respective roles and, most importantly, positively reinforced the learning of young people. We acknowledge that there may be many other opportunities that are already known and being explored which we are unaware of, but would encourage policy makers and leaders in the education system to consider and build further research and testing of opportunities using the themes identified in this report as a starting point.

³<http://wssda.org/Portals/0/News/ResearchBlast/WSSDAResearchBlast20May2014.pdf>

Appendix A: Research methods

Our research approach is grounded in the traditions of qualitative research. It involves the collection of empirical material including personal experience and life stories. The aim of these research methods is to gain new insights into the experiences of individuals to provide contextual data that can be used to inform service development.

Specifically we will use a rapid ethnographic approach with a substantive thematic analysis employing semi-structured interviews and participant observation as primary data sources with card sorting methods and evidencing methods as secondary sources.

The functions of our research are broad. It is:

- Contextual - describing the form or nature of what exists
- Explanatory - examining reasons for, or associations between, what exists
- Evaluative - appraising the effectiveness of what exists
- Generative - aiding the development of new theories, strategies or actions⁴

Our aim is not to uncover the truth about a situation to a level of academic rigour but to develop a number of new theories or strategies to inform service re-design, e.g. to answer questions like, Why do some families choose not to engage with a particular service?. The validity of these theories will then be tested through user testing and experience prototyping in the tradition of service design⁵.

Rapid Ethnography

In *Research Methods in Health: Investigating Health and Health Services*, Ann Bowling defines ethnography as “The study of people in their natural settings; a descriptive account of social life and culture in a defined social system based on qualitative methods (e.g. detailed observations, unstructured interviews, analysis of documents)⁶.

Rapid ethnography, also called *Focussed ethnography*⁷ or *Design Ethnography*⁸ is characterised by relatively short-term field visits, a tightly defined area of focus and a team approach to data collection and analysis. A large amount of data is collected in a relatively short period of time by a team rather than an individual.

The reduction in time needed to complete research (in comparison to the use of ethnography in the tradition of anthropology which might take years) makes research viable within the budget and time available.

Semi-structured Interviews

The following overview of semi-structured interviews is abstracted from the Qualitative Research Guidelines Project, an online resource which aims to provide a comprehensive guide for using Qualitative Methods in Healthcare Research and is congruent with TACSI's understanding and usage of the method.

Characteristics of semi-structured interviews

The interviewer and respondents engage in a formal interview.

The interviewer develops and uses an 'interview guide.' This is a list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order.

The interviewer follows the guide, but is able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate.

When to use semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing, [...] is best used when you won't get more than one chance to interview someone and when you will be sending several interviewers out into the field to collect data.

The semi-structured interview guide provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data.

Semi-structured interviews are often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to allow the researchers to develop a keen understanding of the topic of interest necessary for developing relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions.

The inclusion of open-ended questions and training of interviewers to follow relevant topics that may stray from the interview guide does, however, still provide the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand.

Recording semi-structured interviews

Typically, the interviewer has a paper-based interview guide that he or she follows. Since semi-structured interviews often contain open ended questions and discussions may diverge from the interview guide, it is generally best to tape-record interviews and later transcript these tapes for analysis.

While it is possible to try to jot notes to capture respondents' answers, it is difficult to focus on conducting an interview and jotting notes. This approach will result in poor notes and also detract from the development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Development of rapport and dialogue is essential in unstructured interviews.

If tape-recording an interview is out of the question, consider having a note-taker present during the interview.

Benefits

- Many researchers like to use semi-structured interviews because questions can be prepared ahead of time. This allows the interviewer to be prepared and appear competent during the interview.
- Semi-structured interviews also allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms.
- Semi-structured interviews can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data.

Card Sorting

The following description of Card Sorting is abstracted from *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*⁹ and is congruent with TACSI's understanding and usage of the method.

Card sorting, ranking and prioritising exercises

In card sorting exercises, participants are shown a number of written (or pictorial) examples of an issue, and asked to sort them into piles or to order them – perhaps to draw out relationships between different examples, to categorise all prioritise, or just to stimulate discussion.

[...]

In ranking and prioritising exercises, participants are again given examples (either verbalised by the researchers or shown on cards or other materials) and asked to rank all, to prioritise them, with subsequent discussion helping to surface the dimensions of the assessments and that the attitudes, beliefs or experiences that underpin them.

Card sorting and other ranking techniques are regularly used in survey research. However, their purpose in qualitative research is to facilitate discussion of the reasons for particular choices or priorities, not to measure

the frequency with which each option is selected. So in quantitative research the focus is on discussing the considerations behind the decision made, not just on the actual results of the sorting or prioritising exercise, and it is important to ensure that there is enough time for this.

Evidencing

Evidencing is a service design method. The Better Services by Design (BSBD) website, a research project funded by NHS National Institute for Healthcare Research (UK) gives the following description of the method¹⁰. This description is congruent with TACSI's understanding and usage of the method.

Evidencing

Why: To explore the way a proposed design innovation will feel and work through its touchpoints.

What: Evidencing means taking the ideas and animating them as tangible evidence of the future. This helps you to make early qualitative judgments about the implications of the design solution that you are conceiving.

The service concept is described by representing all the different touchpoints through realistic images that make them visible and give a quick idea of how the service will work, how it will be perceived and how it will improve the user experience.

Example: Health Connect is a future service concept designed to improve access to health and social care services in Buckinghamshire by providing people with relevant travel information at the point of booking a doctor's appointment. Information can be accessed through a telephone service, the website or through the post; the service also allows people to rely on familiar sources of information such as their GP or hospital.

The service concept is described by representing all those touchpoints through realistic images that make them visible and give a quick idea of how the service will work, how it will be perceived and how it will improve the patient experience.

⁹ *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, edited by Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, Professor of Social Policy Jane Lewis, Carol McNaughton Nicholls, Rachel Ormston

¹⁰ The book *This is Service Design Thinking: Basics, Tools, Cases*. Stickdorn & Schneider 2012 provides an overview of service design. In the book the service design consultancy Live|work, one of the originators of the discipline, describe service design as: "the application of established design process and skills to the development of services. It is a creative and practical way to improve existing services and innovate new ones." (2010)

¹¹ Bowling, Ann. *Research Methods in Health: Investigating Health and Health Services*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997.

¹² Knoblauch, Hubert. *Focused Ethnography in Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Volume 6, No. 3, Art. 44 – September 2005, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/20/43>

¹³ *Universal Methods of Design: 100 Ways to Research Complex Problems, Develop Innovative Ideas, and Design Effective Solutions*, Bruce Hanington & Bella Martin

¹⁴ *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, edited by Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, Professor of Social Policy Jane Lewis, Carol McNaughton Nicholls, Rachel Ormston

¹⁵ <http://www.bsbd.org.uk/cards/evidencing/>



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