“Students who display disruptive behaviour of high intensity, frequency and duration while relatively small in number, are among the most difficult for schools to manage” (NSWDET, 2007:p.3)

Exploring how principals construct knowledge in support of students with disruptive behaviour in NSW primary schools

Introduction
Student behaviour and its impact on schooling is a recurring theme in the literature on safe and effective schools (Carr, Dunlap, Horner, Koegel, & et al., 2002; Colvin, Sugai, & Kam‘eenui, 1993; 2001). Educational services for this group of students, particularly students of primary school age, are most commonly provided within regular schools and classrooms. Researchers from differing epistemological foundations have engaged in a significant and ongoing debate over valid forms of educational enquiry and knowledge creation, with the dominant discourse emphasising the value of practical ‘evidence based’ strategies (Davies, Edwards, Gannon, & Laws, 2007; Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004). This call from the dominant positivist school of enquiry ignores some of the interpretive or critical work that investigates the complexity of schools as organisations and how individuals and organisations engage in the social construction of knowledge (Elkind, 1998).

In both these paradigms, the school principal can be found as a central figure.

Epistemology (def)
The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and origin of knowledge. Epistemology asks the question “How do we know what we know?”

Par-a-digm (def)
A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline.

Positivist knowledge claims
• emphasise causality,
• careful empirical observations
• and value free research
(Nueman, 2000).

Subjective / Interpretivist knowledge claims
• knowledge as socially constructed
• Exploration of how humans engage with the world
“we are born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by culture” (Creswell, 2003:9).

Research Question: How does the formation of knowledge impact on the practice of NSW government primary school principal around students with disruptive behaviour? Does epistemology matter?

Quantitative research questions:-
1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of principals in NSW government schools towards students with disruptive behaviour in regular schools?
2. What are the sources of information or knowledge principals’ claim to use to influence practice for students with disruptive behaviour in their school?
3. What are the strengths of the relationships between demographic, attitudinal, knowledge, training and effectiveness factors?
4. Is there a relationship between principals’ own perceived success and the perceptions of others?

Qualitative research questions:-
5. How do principals’ espoused knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of principals reflect their daily practice and the perceptions of others within the school?
6. What ways do principals use and articulate their knowledge in practice? And what forms of knowledge?
7. What insight can the experiences of these principals provide that may guide leadership for students with disruptive behaviour?
A sequential mixed methods study

Utilises a sequential mixed methods approach and progresses through a quantitative and a qualitative stage where the findings of one stage are used to support the findings of another. Creswell describes such mixed methods approaches as those studies in which “the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand the findings of one method with another” (2003:16).

Quantitative Phase

Principals and Behaviour Survey
- Measures of attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of NSW Government primary school principals.

Quantitative Sample (N=635)
- Saturation sampling with target response rate 40%+

Qualitative Phase

Multiple case study using ethnographic techniques
- Semi structured interviews (vignette approach)
- Observation
- Document analysis

Sample

Quantitative Sample (N=635)
- Saturation sampling with target response rate 40%+

Qualitative sample (N=3)
- Purposive sampling – participant selection

References