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ABSTRACT

This study examined the reasons behind exclusion from school, emphasizing the exclusion of students with special needs, ethnic minority children, and children looked after by local authorities. Data collection included interviews with local education authority (LEA) officers; interviews with teachers and administrators; and documents from the schools and LEAs. Overall, teachers appreciated recent Department for Education and Employment guidance but wanted more training and support in handling and minimizing exclusions. Teachers believed high levels of exclusion related to high levels of student mobility in some areas and to difficulties in accessing resources when excluded students were received from elsewhere. The quality of recordkeeping varied considerably between LEAs, influencing their ability to help schools address the needs of ethnic minority students. Interagency project to minimize exclusion were in their early stages. The needs of certain groups were overlooked in policies designed to minimize exclusion. Some principals increasingly used unofficial exclusions. Many principals reported using both fixed period and permanent exclusion in order to access support for special education. Secondary schools with low exclusion rates generally had alternative flexible curriculum arrangements for vulnerable students. Permanent exclusion was considered a failure on the part of inclusive schools. (SM)

REASONS FOR EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL
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January 2001

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REASONS FOR EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL

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In 1999 the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned the Centre for Citizenship Studies in Education (CCSE) at the University of Leicester, to carry out research into the reasons behind exclusion from school. The project team, led by Professor Audrey Osler, were asked to pay particular attention to the exclusion of children with special educational needs, children looked after by Local Authorities, and children from ethnic minority communities.

This is a summary of the full report which considers the underlying reasons behind school exclusions and identifies practices at both school and Local Education Authority (LEA) levels which contribute to minimising the number of exclusions from school. It considers specific actions which schools and LEAs are taking to reduce exclusions, and highlights ways in which these actions address the current disproportionate number of exclusions among certain groups of pupils.

Key Findings

- Teachers appreciate recent DfEE guidance, but would welcome more training and support in handling and minimising exclusions.
- Teachers believe that high levels of exclusion are linked to high levels of pupil mobility in some areas, and to difficulties in accessing resources when excluded pupils are received from elsewhere.
- The quality of record keeping varies considerably between LEAs and influences their ability to support schools in addressing the needs of vulnerable pupils from ethnic minority communities.
- Inter-agency projects to minimise exclusion are at an early stage and there needs to be more systematic evaluation of projects.
- The needs of certain groups, notably Travellers and looked after children, have been overlooked in policies designed to minimise exclusion.
- There appears to be an increasing use of unofficial exclusions by some headteachers. This is sometimes recorded as authorised absence. LEA officers are not always aware of this practice which may be used by some schools as a means of disguising the level of exclusion, or as a means of realising targets for a reduction in exclusion.
- A number of headteachers reported using both fixed period and permanent exclusion as a way of accessing support for special educational needs.
- Secondary schools with low exclusion rates had generally developed alternative flexible curriculum arrangements for vulnerable pupils at key stage 4.
- Permanent exclusion is generally seen as a failure on the part of an inclusive school. Such schools have a team approach to teaching and learning and pupils are given opportunities to be involved in developing codes of behaviour and are encouraged to participate in decision-making.

Background

The research was commissioned in response to the Social Exclusion Unit report *Truancy and School Exclusion*,ⁱ which identified a direct link between exclusion from school and long-term social exclusion. It also sought to explore the value of recommendations from the Commission for Racial Equalityⁱⁱ on reducing the disproportionate numbers of exclusions among pupils from particular ethnic groups.

The research was carried out in the first half of 1999 when schools and LEAs were considering draft guidance from the DfEE which was subsequently published as *Social Inclusion: Pupil Support*.ⁱⁱⁱ Reducing exclusion from school is now an established Government priority and the broad framework in which exclusions are to be tackled is outlined in the Social Exclusion Unit's report. Early in 1999 the report of the Macpherson Inquiry into police handling of the investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence was published. It also made a number of recommendations relating to schools, disciplinary procedures and to exclusions. The new OFSTED inspection framework, introduced in January 2000^{iv} requires schools to identify the ethnicity of all excluded pupils over the previous 12 months.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the research was to understand more about the events which lead to fixed period and permanent exclusion, the procedures and practices which help minimise its use, and to identify similarities and differences between high and low excluding schools.

We had three specific objectives:

- to examine the different underlying reasons for exclusions in a selected sample of schools and LEAs
- to illustrate practices which other schools and LEAs might adopt or adapt in their own attempts to reduce exclusions
- to identify ways in which Government policy might more effectively support LEAs and schools in achieving their targets for the reduction of school exclusions, in various types of schools, and for particular categories of vulnerable pupils.

Methodology

Our key research questions were:

- 1 *how do the reasons for exclusion differ between LEAs and schools?*
- 2 *how does the sanction of exclusion fit into the life of a school?*
- 3 *how can LEAs most effectively support schools in achieving their targets for a reduction in school exclusions?*

In order to identify what might be considered as 'good practice' in minimising school exclusions, we collected and analysed three types of information. These were:

- interviews with LEA officers, including those responsible for managing exclusions, educational psychologists, educational welfare officers, and officers with responsibility for special educational needs and for equality issues.
- interviews with headteachers, teachers and governors in 26 schools (primary, secondary and special) from 6 Local Authorities. The schools were selected in consultation with LEA officers, to include both schools which had addressed school exclusion and which had declining rates and others which had relatively high rates of exclusion to other schools in the Authority.
- documentary evidence made available to us by the schools and LEAs, including LEA Educational Development Plans and Behaviour Support Plans; school and LEA policies on behaviour, pastoral care and equal opportunities; reports on exclusion patterns and on specific initiatives to reduce exclusions.

The case study LEAs included two shire counties, two metropolitan Authorities, a London borough, and a new unitary Authority. They were selected to cover a wide geographical spread and to include Authorities which have varying levels of exclusion. In seeking to identify good practice at LEA level in supporting schools in developing more inclusive practices, we compared the perceptions of LEA officers with those of headteachers and school governors.

Issues

Exclusion and school life

Teachers in our study generally welcomed recent DfEE guidance on exclusion. They believe that there are a number of factors behind current high levels of exclusion in some schools. These include high levels of pupil mobility in some areas and difficulties in accessing resources when excluded pupils are received from elsewhere. Teachers recognise the important role which Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) can play in minimising exclusions and argue that it is critical that SENCOs in primary schools be given non-contact time to carry out their duties.

A number of schools have established effective partnerships with a range of organisations to ensure more inclusive practices. These include community groups, local businesses and other education providers, including further education.

Teaching strategies

Although most teachers acknowledge the need for a more inclusive and multicultural curriculum, which will motivate pupils from all backgrounds, many expressed the need for more training and support to enable them to develop this work. Secondary schools with low exclusion rates had generally developed alternative flexible curriculum arrangements for vulnerable pupils at key stage 4. Our research identified the need for monitoring to establish which groups of pupils are offered an alternative curriculum and whether they are able to gain access to mainstream qualifications.

Unofficial exclusions

We found evidence of increasing use of unofficial exclusions by some headteachers. This is sometimes recorded as authorised absence. LEA officers were sometimes aware of this, sometimes not. Unofficial and unrecorded exclusion may be used by some schools as a means of disguising the level of exclusion, or as a means of realising targets for a reduction in exclusion. It is also sometimes used 'in the best interests of the child' so that a child does not have the 'stigma' of exclusion on his or her personal record. Unofficial exclusions were generally short term measures although unofficial permanent exclusions may also operate particularly for some pupils in the final years of secondary school. These amount to long term truancy which is encouraged and condoned by the school.

When unofficial exclusions operate parents and carers forfeit any rights they may have to challenge

the school's decision. Whether short-term or permanent, such exclusions lead to problems for children, their parents and schools. They may face difficulties when they are attempting to find an alternative school place, when the child starts in the new school, or when they transfer to secondary school.

The role of LEAs

LEAs have a key role to play in the management of exclusions, particularly in the provision of training, advice, monitoring and in feeding back information from the monitoring process. The specialist support services, including Education Welfare Officers, Educational Psychologists, Behaviour Support Services, Multicultural Support Services and curriculum advisers all have a key role to play. One of the difficulties encountered in this study in assessing reasons for exclusion from schools is the wide range in the quality of record keeping between LEAs. Although partially explained in terms of local priorities, it also reflects the stage in development of the LEA. In this area, as in a number of others, greater inter-LEA co-operation in expertise might enhance good practice in the management of exclusions and permit greater comparability between LEAs.

Inter-agency work

Inter-agency projects to minimise exclusion are at an early stage. While we found examples of co-operation between LEAs and other services, such as children's social services, health, and youth justice, to meet the needs of vulnerable young people, more work is needed in this area and there needs to be more systematic evaluation of projects.

Ethnicity

LEAs vary tremendously in the lead they are able to provide in supporting schools in addressing the needs of vulnerable pupils from ethnic minority communities. The needs of certain groups, notably Travellers, have been overlooked. It is sometimes assumed that where there is a multicultural support service or a Traveller education service that other officers do not then need to give specific attention to the needs of Traveller pupils.

Due to difficulties in interpreting the records on reasons for exclusion, it was difficult to assess from our research whether reasons for exclusion differ significantly between schools and LEAs according to ethnicity. Nevertheless, some teachers and headteachers believe that there is sometimes differential treatment between ethnic groups, with some white teachers liable to misinterpret the

behaviour of certain black pupils. OFSTED^v found evidence that white excluded pupils are more likely to have been traumatised, be of below average achievement and to be excluded for verbal abuse. By contrast, black excluded pupils are more often of above average achievement and more commonly challenge teachers' judgements.

Looked after children

There is an urgent need for greater co-operation between LEAs and other agencies to address the needs of looked after children, who are over-represented among those excluded from school. Currently LEAs are often unaware of the numbers of such children, or even who they are.

The relationship between fixed period and permanent exclusion

The quality of data collected by LEAs makes it difficult to identify patterns in the relationship between fixed period exclusion across or between Authorities. Some schools have effectively used fixed period exclusions as part of a package of measures to prevent permanent exclusion.

A number of headteachers reported using both fixed period and permanent exclusion as a way of accessing support for special educational needs. Official statistics indicate that in 1998/99 1921 pupils with statements of SEN were permanently excluded from schools in England. They amounted to 18.5 per cent of all excluded pupils.^{vi} The overall numbers of pupils with SEN is likely to be much greater, if we take into consideration those who are on the SEN register but who do not have a statement, and those whose SEN have not been identified. Where SEN provision generally, and EBD school places in particular, were not available within an Authority, some headteachers reported using exclusion as a means of accessing appropriate support. However, LEA officers pointed out that this strategy was not always effective. Some excluded children who were subsequently placed in special schools outside the Authority ended up being excluded from those schools.

Developing an inclusive ethos

Where schools identified pupils vulnerable to exclusion, this was generally achieved through the pastoral system. However, since problems with behaviour are often linked to difficulties with academic work, this was sometimes the route by which particular individuals were identified. Low excluding schools have what we have termed an inclusive ethos. Permanent exclusion is generally seen as a failure on the part of an inclusive school.

Such schools have a team approach to teaching and learning and pupils are given opportunities to be involved in developing codes of behaviour and are encouraged to participate in decision-making.^{vii} Inclusive schools are sensitive to diversity and have procedures in place to monitor both attainment and rewards/sanctions by ethnicity and gender. Inclusive schools have strong working relationships with parents and draw on community resources. The leadership of the headteacher is critical in establishing an inclusive school which minimises the use of exclusion.

Recommendations

Exclusion from school remains a serious problem which often results in social exclusion. Our research highlighted a number of actions on the part of central government, LEAs and schools which might minimise its use.

What the DfEE/central government can do:

- review the maximum length of fixed period exclusion, ending the current 45-day period
- ask all LEAs with racial or other disparities in the use of exclusions to demonstrate how this will be addressed in their Education Development Plans
- review procedures to check growing number of unofficial exclusions
- support LEAs in developing integrated databases on exclusions
- ensure that mainstream funding mechanisms (for example Standards Fund) for projects that tackle exclusion require monitoring by ethnicity and gender; encourage LEAs to require similar monitoring when they work in partnership with other organisations
- give priority, through funding mechanisms, to projects that enable co-operation between LEA services or between LEAs and other agencies, for example, co-operation with voluntary organisations and community groups
- provide additional advice to LEAs on monitoring by ethnicity, drawing on best practice in this field developed by schools and LEAs
- advocate non-contact time for SENCOs, particularly in primary schools.

What LEAs and schools can do:

- set targets for employment of qualified ethnic minority staff so as to enable the provision of an appropriate and professional service for all
- provide training for officers, teachers and school governors to enable them to examine

how racial stereotyping affects school life and the education service

- supplement statistical data on exclusions with qualitative data from surveys and focus groups involving pupils, parents, and governors as well as teachers and inspectors
- report on ethnic monitoring processes and develop actions to address disparities
- ensure that flexible curriculum arrangements at key stage 4 are monitored by ethnicity and gender
- discourage the exclusion of pupils with Special Educational Needs, recognising that exclusion will very seldom be appropriate for such children
- monitor exclusions by SEN at various stages of the code of practice, not just for pupils who have statements
- advocate non-contact time for SENCOs
- offer support to schools who accept excluded pupils
- consider how they may develop and strengthen inter-LEA co-operation
- set targets to work towards a no exclusions policy in EBD and other special schools
- ensure that parents and carers of vulnerable and excluded pupils are provided with appropriate information concerning their rights and sources of support.

Copies of the full report (RR244) – priced £4.95 – are available by writing to DfEE Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Copies of this Research Brief (RB244) are available free of charge from the above address. Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at <http://www.dfee.gov.uk/research/>

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- i Social Exclusion Unit (1998) *Truancy and School Exclusion*. London: Cabinet Office.
 - ii Commission for Racial Equality (1997) *Exclusion from School and Racial Equality: good practice guide*. London: CRE. This guide was based on the findings of research commissioned by the CRE. The full report is published as Osler, A. (1997b) *Exclusion from School and Racial Equality: research report*. London: CRE.
 - iii Department for Education and Employment (1999) *Social Inclusion: pupil support*. London: DfEE.
 - iv OFSTED (1999a)
 - v OFSTED (1996), op. cit
 - vi www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics/DB/SFR/s0157/tab002.html Analysis of the exclusion statistics for Birmingham LEA suggested that ‘there is reason to suspect that neglected learning difficulties may lie behind at least some of the disciplinary problems’ and that 40 per cent of excluded pupils were either statemented or had begun the process of the Special Educational Needs assessment procedure (Osler, 1997b, op.cit. p.33).
 - vii See Osler, A. (2000) Children’s rights, responsibilities and understandings of school discipline, *Research Papers in Education*, 15 (1), 49-69.



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