CREID *Briefing*

Exclusion from School – What does it mean to pupils?

by Gillean McCluskey

'Inclusion and Equality' is one of the five National Priorities set for education in Scotland. However, there have long been tensions between the inclusion agenda and an emphasis on the need to raise standards of achievement and attainment. There has been widespread concern about indiscipline and some recent support for a return to the 'power to exclude' amid a growing overall sense of turbulence in schools. This briefing examines the implications of findings from a study of the experiences of a range of pupils in Edinburgh secondary schools, those who have experienced some form of exclusion and the generality of pupils. It raises important questions for city schools about the assumed distinctions between these two groups, and has urgent implications for current responses to discipline and disruption in the classroom.

Major Findings

- Disciplinary exclusion is seen as a major event by the majority of pupils.

- Disciplinary exclusion is seen as ineffective by the majority of pupils.

- Low-level disruptive behaviour is widespread among the 'settled majority'.

- There is no clear-cut distinction between 'disruptive' and 'disrupted' pupils.
- The same pupil can sometimes be disruptive and at other times disrupted by the behaviour of others.

- Pupil Support Groups, while central to the City's provision for vulnerable young people, have no place in young people's understanding of exclusion.

- Pupils who have been excluded for reasons of indiscipline often still value the relationships they have with adults in school.

- Female pupils are much more involved in disruption than expected.

- Non-attendance is seen as complex and sometimes legitimate by both the generality and more marginal pupils.

- Non-attendance by girls and young women is higher than expected.

Background to the study

The study set out to examine exclusion from school from a new set of perspectives, bringing to the foreground the experiences both of those excluded and the generality of pupils in Edinburgh mainstream secondary schools. It gathered data through direct contact with young people and explored their perceptions of issues surrounding exclusion, disruption, non-attendance and a range of other experiences of marginalisation. The findings were used to examine current understandings of exclusion and to generate a new set of questions about the continuing turbulence in schools today.

Policy tensions

The research had its origins in concerns about the tensions within policies aimed at increasing the inclusiveness of schools in recent years. The initiatives arising out of these welcome policies have been instrumental in ensuring an increase in the numbers of children and young people with additional needs who are successfully maintained within mainstream schools. It is to be hoped that the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act to education will continue this process. However, there has long been debate about the differential impact of inclusion policies on some groups of young people, and how best to reconcile the twin targets of increasing both attainment and inclusion. This tension is particularly acute for those whose troubled and troublesome behaviour seems to place their needs in conflict with the needs of an academically successful and well-disciplined school.

Exclusion targets

As part of the drive for inclusion by the New Labour Government in 1997, targets were set for a substantial reduction in rates of official, disciplinary exclusion across the UK. These targets were monitored closely by local authorities, and exclusion rates used as one of a range of performance indicators in schools. However, since then, and within a relatively short space of time, there has been a powerful resurgence of concern about the effects of increased disruption on more settled pupils and the rights of teachers and pupils to work in a positive and calm environment. Significantly, no new national targets for reducing disciplinary exclusion were set when the initial three year period came to an end, and there was no outcry about a need to do so, despite evidence that exclusion is rising again (SEED 2005).

The aim of the study

Understanding of exclusion and its relation to issues of inclusion has until now focused on mapping the terrain of official disciplinary exclusion and the collation of statistics across the UK and over time. It has gathered its information from teachers and other professionals and to a lesser extent from permanently excluded children and young people and their parents/carers.

This study aimed to gather the views of a broader group of pupils, both those on the margins and, significantly, those seen as the 'settled majority' by teachers; pupils whose views are central to a fuller understanding of the issues.

The design of the study

Using a qualitative approach, the study focused on four mainstream secondary schools across the City of Edinburgh. Two of these schools had high rates of official exclusion and two much lower rates of exclusion, thus allowing exploration of the common assumption that the experience of a pupil in a high excluding school differs from that of a pupil in a school with lower levels of disruption.

One-to-one interviews and focus groups took place with pupils in each of the four schools, involving a total of 61 young people between the ages of 13-16 years of age. As the study was interested in exploring the boundaries between different groups of pupils, the idea of 'layers of exclusion' was developed, and, together with pupils who had been excluded for reasons of indiscipline, the study also sought the views of pupils who were seen by staff to be marginalized or excluded in other ways. These included, for example, young people with attendance difficulties and more socially vulnerable or isolated pupils. Approximately equal numbers of male and female pupils participated overall. Although this is a small study, and not intended to be statistically generalisable, it draws on a large body of knowledge in this field, giving confidence in the findings discussed below.

Findings

Emerging from the findings was a clear and surprising indication that, in each school, there was a fluidity between these 'layers of exclusion'. Although often seen as having quite different needs, pupils who were seen as 'disruptive' shared many similar characteristics and experiences with those seen as marginalised in very different ways in school. Perhaps more surprising, the findings also challenge the commonly held and powerful distinction made between disruptive and disrupted pupils.

Do pupils think that disciplinary exclusion works?

There was confirmation that official exclusion associated with overtly challenging behaviour was seen as a very serious process by nearly all the young people. However, it was also found that most young people, irrespective of direct involvement in the exclusion process, regarded official exclusion as entirely ineffective or only partially effective, and sometimes counter-productive. 'It just made me mad' said one young man. 'It disnae make you like them any better!' said another. It is interesting that this, and many of the most important findings were consistent across all four schools, across each 'layer of exclusion', both for excludees and the generality of pupils, and among male and female pupils.

Do pupils think school discipline is effective?

Most of the young people, whatever their relationship with school, and regardless of school attended, were dissatisfied with their school discipline system. 'Pupils get away with mucking about' was a common response. Procedures for checking attendance, for example, were seen as typical of poorly managed school systems, particularly by those who admitted missing school.

What do pupils know about support structures?

It was reassuring to find that some vulnerable young people had a clear idea of the range of supports available in and around school, and that they felt able to approach adults with their concerns. Some individual teachers and non-teaching staff were clearly held in high regard by some very troubled pupils, with one saying, 'She's brilliant. She treats everybody like gold'. Another stated, 'if you're sound with him, he's sound with you'. However, of great concern was the lack of talk by any young person, in any of the four schools, about inter-agency groups, the Pupil Support Groups (PSGs), seen by the education department as central to its provision for vulnerable pupils.

Who causes disruption?

As expected, the generality of pupils was not often involved in serious disruptive behaviour. Surprisingly, however, pupils in all four schools reported much higher than predicted involvement in minor disruption; the kinds of low level disruption which research (Munn, Sharpe and Johnstone 2004, Johnstone and Munn 1997) has suggested teachers find most difficult to tackle. Furthermore, female involvement in this low level disruption was found to be at a much higher level than would be predicted from local and national statistics.

This same complexity was apparent in discussions about attendance at school. Although sometimes scathing of school monitoring procedures for attendance, as noted earlier, there was a general acceptance among the young people involved in the research of the need for regular attendance and an awareness of the problems associated with missing lessons. There was some concerning evidence that more young women may be missing school than records reveal. There was also some evidence that non-attendance is closely associated with issues of bullying, suggesting that pupils still have little trust in the capacity of schools to respond effectively to this issue, except where it involves open physical assault or verbal confrontation. 'Teachers *try* to help…'said one young woman.

Concluding issues

It should be of immediate concern to schools that exclusion, a central, long-established part of the school discipline process is seen simultaneously as significant and yet ineffective. It seems likely that experience of this paradox must affect pupils' engagement with the broader priorities of schools in terms of discipline. There is, therefore, a need for a measured re-appraisal of the aims and use of this sanction of last resort.

It may be argued that young people of this age might object to any constraints on their behaviour. However, it was notable that young people's objections were most often not to the use of exclusion per se but to its overuse, its sometimes inappropriate use and to a perceived lack of effectiveness in many cases. Similarly,

objections to their school's discipline system was to a perceived lack of consistency and effectiveness, not to the need for its existence. Indeed, the call for teachers to be more strict was noted in many of the responses from these research participants and echoes findings of previous research.

The prevalence of a sense of turbulence is significant, not least because it emerges so strongly from the responses of pupils who are usually regarded as affected by disruption rather than causing it and hence also regarded as less likely to be prejudiced against the discipline system. However, the juxtaposition of the generality's direct involvement in minor but persistent rule-breaking with such strong views on current discipline processes presents an uncomfortable paradox to those who would see 'the disruptive' and 'the disrupted' as two quite distinct groups.

The unanimity and strength of these views about discipline are all the more powerful because the young people were so positive about other aspects of their schools; because those who contributed their views included groups of pupils seen as more 'settled' and engaged with school; and because these views come from pupils in both high and low excluding schools.

If the experience of these young people is also the experience of the wider school populace in Edinburgh and across the country, then it confirms in part the legitimacy of policy concern about the effects of disruption on learning and social relationships in schools. However, by revealing the widespread involvement of the generality in rule-breaking, it places concerns about disruption within a much more demanding policy context. These responses require a new, much larger set of questions about schools and schooling in Edinburgh.

It is time to ask whether punishment is a necessary and effective part of schooling. It is time to consider carefully whether disruption in schools reflects a fundamental and legitimate criticism of the structures of our schools which can only find its voice in small but persistent acts of defiance. These young people offer a range of suggestions for improving teaching and learning. It is likely that pressures on schools will only continue to increase unless they seek a much more coherent and restorative set of relationships between adults and pupils in schools.

Further reading

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Osler, A. and Vincent, K. (2003) *Girls and Exclusion: rethinking the agenda,* RoutledgeFalmer, London.

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About this study

This research formed part of the work towards the doctoral thesis, 'Exclusion from School; the experience of those excluded and the generality of pupil' (2004). The existing literature on exclusion had some significant gaps and the focus on pupil voice and on exploring different pupil voices was a response to that. The study analyses understandings and views of a range of pupil on issues associated with exclusion and discipline in mainstream secondary school settings.

Further information

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