CWDC
Children's Workforce
Development Council

'I'm excluded – who's gonna care?'
Multi-agency teams supporting the
care of excluded children in educational
settings – policy into practice, what
works and what doesn't?

Sharing our experience

Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

PLR0809/062

This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

'I'm excluded – who's gonna care?' Multi-agency teams supporting the care of excluded children in educational settings – policy into practice, what works and what doesn't?

Andrea Connolly and Michelle Shewring

Abstract

The aim of the research was to discover who meets the needs of children at risk of exclusion, an interest sparked by meeting vulnerable children and listening to their stories. The research team wanted to discover whether strategies used do meet policy and best practice guidance. Are multi-agency teams successful? How do children feel about those who provide their care?

Semi-structured interviews were used, as well as discussion groups, with the following professionals and young people:

- one Further Education administrator
- two Further Education programme co-ordinators
- one primary school Pastoral Support team member
- one primary school head teacher
- two secondary school Pastoral Support team members
- three social workers
- one sports coach
- one sports coach assistant
- three foster carers
- seven young people.

In addition, we carried out a literature review to discover that when schools work in conjunction with a range of other professionals, in a manner which includes children and parents and makes the process comfortable and child-led, results are good. Children feel supported and are able to achieve. The research also identified that our agencies appear, at times, to misinterpret the guidance, or simply ignore it – allowing egos, personalities and inconsequential agendas to interfere with pastoral care.

Examples of good practice to share with others have been identified, as have a few challenges, the avoidance of which might make the difference for some children.

The research discovered that behaviour support personnel in schools appear to have a valuable role to play for vulnerable children, as do many others however; also, excitingly there are instances of good practice which may limit incidents of exclusion.

This PLR project has provided opportunity to discover how outcomes for children can be improved by working together, also that one person alone can make all the difference. Appreciating when a team or personal approach is best may be the key to success.

'I'm excluded – who's gonna care?'
Multi-agency teams supporting the care of excluded children in educational settings – policy into practice, what works and what doesn't?

Andrea Connolly and Michelle Shewring

Introduction

This practitioner led research project focuses on excluded children and those at risk of exclusion from mainstream education and/or community activities. We strived to discover the impact of multi-agency team working on these young people, and tried to demonstrate to what degree this approach is successful, or not. Our project has an emphasis on discovering to what extend current policy matches practice for our most vulnerable children and to what extent good practice guidelines have altered practice.

Both researchers are Further Education (FE) lecturers, with expertise in the areas of excluded, looked after or at risk children and young people. Both have specific interest in the holistic nature of facilitating learning and are keen proponents of the humanism approach to learning and development.

Aims of the project

The fundamental aim of our project was to discover what works best for children and young people who have been excluded from education or their local community. Our combined experience has given us the knowledge that some children just don't get on that well in school and we intended to find out why, and what can be done to help. We hoped to research the relationship between how multi-agency teams meet the educational and pastoral support needs of young people during incidents of exclusion. We aimed to explore how children and young people at risk of exclusion are cared for while learning.

We have noticed a difference in how learning opportunities are delivered in Further Education establishments and how this differs to secondary settings. Young people who are excluded, or are classed as at risk of exclusion, appear to feel more comfortable with an FE team than in the secondary sector. One purpose of our project has been to understand why this may be, and work towards providing a set of good practice guidelines which may enable secondary school teams to deliver more appropriate learning opportunities, and pastoral care, for these young people. Policies and procedures are in place at government and at local educational authority level to enable the specific needs of these vulnerable young people to be met. Our research will link these policies with the action which is being taken in schools and colleges and contemplate levels of effectiveness

Context

Within the scope of this research project, we have consulted a range of documents including, but not exclusively, *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), the Joint Inspection Report, *Education of children who are looked after by local authorities* (SSI/Ofsted 1994), *Truancy and School Exclusion* (Social Exclusion Unit 1998), *Improving*

Behaviour and Attendance, Guidance on Exclusion from Schools and Pupil Referral Units (DCSF 2008), the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the *Joint Guidance on the Education of Children in Public Care* (DoH/DfES 2000).

As a point of clarification, we have researched various texts regarding the care and education of looked after children (children in the care of the local authority), along with others which have provided many good practice points regarding *all* children and not just those who are looked after. Looked after children do sometimes have specific issues which need to be addressed, However the documents relate to children with additional difficulties which children who reside with their biological families also face.

In order to triangulate our findings, we have researched existing studies carried out by individuals and organizations. The most notable of which has been *Learn the Child* (Cairns and Stanway 2004), a text which combines knowledge of children facing serious challenges (including those who experience difficulty with empathy, regulating impulse, regulating rage, managing shame, who have been traumatized or maltreated) with guidance from a range of distinguished documents and publications.

Methods

We have used qualitative research methods in the form of semi-structured interviews and discussion groups and carried out secondary research in the form of literary and policy reviews in order to identify current guidelines for best practice.
The information we have concentrated on is, in the main, subjective – concentrating on how people feel about the treatment they have received – and the methods we have chosen have proven to be successful in collecting the kind of data we were interested in discovering.

Methodology

Discussion groups

These were included as a method so that young people could bounce ideas off each other rather than be faced with a one-to-one interview. We found that this approach worked well as the young people involved said they felt less concerned about the process if they had their friends around them. Some young people expressed the opinion that they felt more comfortable than they had previously when others had tried to talk to them, alone, about sensitive issues. The young people involved were also able to clarify their thoughts with each other during the discussion whereas they otherwise may have omitted important details. (However, we did give each young person the opportunity to speak to us alone, which one did – as well as joining in with a discussion group.)

Semi-structured interviews

We have planned and carried out a number of informal interviews with a range of participants. The interviews were planned to take into account previous research findings (Shewring 2008) which demonstrate that people are more likely to speak about emotive issues when they had formed a relationship with the interviewer, and that real honesty was more likely to be forthcoming when several conversations had taken place and a relationship formed. We felt, having trialled a questionnaire, that this kind of semi-structured interview was the most effective way of gathering the data we needed.

Literature reviews

We have researched current and best practice through literature and policy review. We searched for literature (in the form of books and journal articles), policy, procedure and best practice documents using parameters such as 'current policy on exclusion', 'caring for excluded children', 'teaching children with behaviour difficulties/challenges', 'social care for excluded children' and 'teaching looked after children'.

The books we chose to review are *Children in Difficulty: A guide to understanding and helping* by Julian Elliott and Maurice Place (ISBN 0-415-14459-0), *Learn the Child: Helping looked after children to learn* by Kate Cairns and Chris Stanway (ISBN 1-903-69938-X) and *Getting the Buggers to Behave 2, Why do students misbehave? What can I do about it? And what should I not do about it?* by Sue Cowley (ISBN 0-8264-6500-5). The policy documents we reviewed in detail are *The National Curriculum: Handbook for secondary school teachers in England* by the QCA (ISBN 1-85838-590-3) and *Improving Behaviour and Attendance: Guidance on exclusion from schools and pupil referral units* issued by the DCSF in 2008.

Ethical considerations

Our study was primarily concerned with finding out who cares about the welfare and education of children and young people excluded from education or their community. The feelings we expected to encounter made moral and ethical issues of paramount importance to us in planning our study. The information leaflet we created follows university guidance on best practice, as does the consent form (written with young people in mind, but also praised as user friendly by professionals and parents alike). The main barrier we encountered was in gaining ethical approval for our project – not because of the subject matter or methodology – but because of the sheer time-scales involved.

Our mentor from Making Research Count has been instrumental in providing us with the information we needed but our initial lack of knowledge regarding ethical approval, combined with a keen desire to get started with the project, alongside a plethora of available but highly confusing information, made unravelling the

requirements difficult. We have applied for ethical approval but, at the time of writing, we have not received an answer from the department involved.

Information leaflet

A number of the young people we spoke to have, in one way or another, been affected by exclusion, people's opinions about how they have, or may have, behaved, their family background and other issues. It was for this reason, and to ensure transparency and accuracy, that we wrote and provided an information leaflet to everyone we spoke to about this project. We found that this leaflet provided people with the opportunity to ask questions about the study before the interviews and discussion groups took place. These strategies enabled us to conduct the interviews with a clear acknowledgement that the participants understood the rationale behind the interview and were able to move ahead comfortably.

Interviews and discussions were based around a few, carefully chosen, questions designed to draw information out rather than be a seemingly endless round of closed questions (which we felt may have elicited 'yes' and 'no' answers rather than enable us to reach an understanding of how people felt).

The ethical approval process has created barriers which however, as we gained more experience of the process, coupled with the expertise of our mentor, we have overcome to a certain degree – but not completely. This has limited our reporting of certain findings; however, review of current best practice research and documentation has enabled us to overcome this limitation to some extent.

Strengths and limitations

We have been very pleased with the outcomes of our project on the whole; however, we have found some barriers along the way that limit our contentment. When approaching professionals who we wished to invite to take part in the study, many were anxious about how colleagues would view their involvement. Questions asked were 'will things I say be repeated?', 'will my name be used?', 'can you say I'm from miles away?', among others. We felt that participants were keen to ensure their personal details would be kept completely confidential which, in a way, prompted us to believe that what they were going to say may be great interest to our study. We had already provided information on ethical issues and were keen to demonstrate to participants that their involvement would remain strictly confidential. To this end, we have, at times, conducted interviews away from the workplace and have created discussion opportunities in what could be regarded as 'safe' environments.

Findings

Problem at hand

We wanted to discover who cares about the education and pastoral support needs of children who have been excluded. This interest was sparked by meeting children who have been excluded, or were at risk of exclusion, and listening to their stories. We wanted to find out who provided their education?; were the strategies used in line with policy?; was the intervention of multi-agency teams successful?, and were there any examples of best practice that had worked for children and young people that we could gather and share with others?

Strategy and guidance

Guidance regarding exclusion comes, on whole, from *Improving Behaviour and Attendance: Guidance on exclusion from schools and pupil referral units* issued by the DCSF in 2008. The guidance has a plethora of information about best practice relating to strategies to avoid exclusion, and the procedures to follow in the event of exclusion. Included is information on how positive behaviour and early intervention can be utilized to reduce the risk of exclusion and how education should be provided for children who are excluded. There is also guidance relating to reintegration and working with other professionals (including the police, education psychologists, along with others). Paragraph one of part one states that 'in most cases permanent exclusion will be the last resort after a range of measures have been tried to improve the pupil's behaviour'.

The guidance lists the strategies which should be tried before exclusion as:
- the school engaging with parents
- a change of teaching set or class
- curriculum alternatives at Key Stage 4, including attendance at a Further Education college or another form of alternative provision
- temporary placement in an in-school Learning Support Unit as part of a planned positive programme for pupils
- temporary or part-time placement in a Pupil Referral Unit or with a voluntary /private sector alternative provider, where the pupil can receive educational provision intended to improve their behaviour
- a managed move to another school, with the consent of all parties involved; this can be successful for pupils at risk of exclusion and as an alternative to permanent exclusion
- consideration by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), with colleagues, of possible interventions within the school
- assessment of special educational needs, including possible placement in a special school
- allocation of a key worker such as a learning mentor, Connexions Personal Adviser, Education Welfare Officer or member of a Behaviour and Education Support Team
- referral to a specific support service, such as the Education Welfare Service, Children's Services or the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

Of the ten strategies listed, you may note that (if we include parents) nine of them involve collaboratively working with professions other than teachers within the child's own school. This is an enormous clue as the importance placed on multi-agency working whilst dealing with children at risk of exclusion. One of the participants in our study was able to recount an incident of exclusion where not only had *only one* of these strategies been tried prior to permanent exclusion, but there was no request from the school for support from outside agencies before they excluded. (The exclusion was subsequently overturned at appeal.)

Interestingly, and as pointed out by another participant in our study, there isn't any mention *here* of extra training for staff (which could be provided by a range of other professionals) in relation to a specific child or relating to a young person's individual need which is causing their particular risk of exclusion at the time in question (although there is information about training elsewhere in the document).

Best practice example of multi-agency working

There are examples of these within our primary and secondary research findings; however, as an example of exemplary practice, we would like to share one participant's input here.

One of the best examples we heard about, regarding a young person at risk of exclusion, was a collaboration between an FE college (with a sensitive and inclusive senior manager), a Connexions PA, several social workers, foster carers and the local authority Education for Children in Care team. The result of one well publicized, and attended, meeting was that the young person's education plans were settled there and then and the young person given a place at the college where she is now doing well.   This demonstrates how people, working together, can make enormous differences to a young person's outcomes. Sadly, this meeting followed an entire two terms of temporary exclusion, absence and missed educational opportunities. This young person's life was turned around by, (a) her own appreciation of the kind of education which suited her needs, and (b) one 'gung ho' senior manager who knew they had the skills needed to draw together a group of people who could help.

Literature review

We have already discussed how much emphasis is placed on multi-agency working within the *Improving Behaviour and Attendance: Guidance on exclusion from schools and pupil referral units* document. The other literature we reviewed also places huge importance on this with information from the Joint Inspection Report, *Education of children who are looked after by local authorities*, which states 'If the standards of achievement of the children are to be improved, individual schools have to assume in conjunction with the LEA, a greater responsibility for fostering and maintaining partnerships with social services and developing strategies which promote the achievements of children' (Cairns and Stanway 2004).

Page 3 of the QCA document *The National Curriculum: Handbook for Secondary School Teachers in England* states that 'Institutions [should] work together to deliver

programmes suitable for each student.' This statement gives schools permission to utilize alternative institutions to maintain the care and education of children and young people and yet, participants have told us, children are still being excluded because 'the school doesn't meet their needs, the teachers don't like them because they can't sit still for the whole lesson', this quote being from a young person in a top set, doing very well at school, who demonstrated enormous empathy and understanding for the challenges faced by children at risk of exclusion. During our study we found that there appears to be a link between behaviour and subject. When children feel as though they have had a real say in what they are studying, behaviour seems to be better. This points the finger at vocational study institutions being of benefit for some compulsory education age learners.

During literature and policy reviews we discovered a range of information relating to multi-agency professionals working together in the best interests of the child. The Children Act 1989 states that the 'Welfare of the child is paramount'. Why then, as a hypothetical question of course, have we heard so often during our study that children are being excluded before any attempt to involve other professionals has been made?

Interviews and discussion groups

Children generally regarded as at risk of having difficulties at school are those who have difficulty with empathy, regulating impulse, regulating rage, managing shame, those who have been traumatized and children who have suffered abuse or been maltreated (Cairns and Stanway 2004). During interviews and discussion groups we asked questions designed to encourage discussion about these learners in particular, and to find out which strategies, and which professionals, had been employed to meet their needs.

'Parents are often overlooked when meetings are planned to talk about our children.' One parent we spoke to felt that her input was important to professional meetings regarding her child. There are various times when this involvement may be inappropriate (according to some); however, a recommendation for good practice may be a recognition that parents and primary carers most often know their children best and are often well placed to inform others of behaviour strategies which may work. One of the participants in our study raised as a point of good practice that, in Finland, parents have a legal responsibility to work with their child's school (rather than the other way around as is the requirement of our own early years education system). It was the participant's view that this requirement, and subsequent involvement of parents in their children's education, had a positive impact on behaviour and exclusion rates.

Pupils who are affected by the behaviour of children at risk of exclusion can see injustice in exclusion in the majority of cases – this is contrary to findings detailed in *Getting the Buggers to Learn* (Cowley, 2001) where pupils are frustrated by challenging behaviour. One of the limitations of our small-scale project was the number of people we were able to speak to, and geographical area. Perhaps these findings may be different in other circumstances; however the participants we spoke to were of the opinion that when challenging students are respected more (as they

are by certain teachers) their behaviour is better. This finding points to the importance of peer to peer mentoring in schools where teachers who are able to gain respect, and therefore manage behaviour well, can share their ideas and strategies with others. This kind of peer to peer (as opposed to senior management down supervision) approach may provide a vehicle for younger, differently educated teachers, to share their understanding with others.

During the 'organization of data' phase of our study we discovered that children at risk of exclusion appear to be a problem for a very rare minority of professionals – the majority wish to support them; however this is seen as completely opposite to what children and young people feel. They generally feel as though the majority see them as a problem and only a small minority genuinely want to help them. Perhaps, if meetings were organized in such as way as to make them welcoming and inclusive for the young person themselves, they would witness a plethora of professionals working on their behalf, rather than be limited to their discussions with one or two people who know them well and can get them to talk?

We have discovered a school where the children at risk are moved, one at a time, into top sets. This has had an astounding effect on some children – they have no-one to show off to and the only way of getting attention is to 'say something smart'. We can see how this may work for some, but perhaps not for others; however, results suggest that it may be a sound investment of energy in some situations. This kind of strategy would clearly involve the commitment of many staff within a school to make it work.

We were fortunate to get an insight into some personal feelings as to why exclusion may be more likely to occur in secondary schools, than primary schools.   One of the reasons cited was too many layers of management: 'are the kids going to have as much respect for their year leader when they know there is a year head above them? Also, they know that the head of the school probably won't even know their name, so where's the respect?' Perhaps this demonstrates that sometimes too many people working together for the benefit of children isn't always appropriate?

One finding that sadly surprised us is that social worker links with schools aren't always positive – there appears to be a relative major discrepancy between the educational perspective and the feeling that 'there is more to these children's lives than education, what is important right now for them – they can do GCSEs once they have learnt to feel comfortable in a room full of people'. If professionals working in a multi-agency team for the good of one child do not share the same priority for a child, then the multi-agency meeting is unlikely to be very productive. Perhaps the first item on any agenda could be to reach an understanding of the aim of the meeting and to agree priorities – for example, do we want this child to feel comfortable in school, to improve attendance and make friends or do we want them to improve their grades?

It appears that children don't have to do much for trouble to kick in – labelling, historic facts: 'teachers get rid of them before they even get into trouble'.   Children from some families, specific areas, road etc get labelled – 'you are from there so therefore you must be like X, Y or Z'. It would be, therefore, be 'absolutely fantastic' if schools were to make more use of different community groups in order to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. This kind of third sector

involvement may prove to be beneficial in dispelling myths of violence and gore which seem to preclude some staff even meeting children.

We have discovered that integrated working in schools has worked well for many children and young people (with the involvement of learning support assistants, pastoral support workers and behaviour management teams). These additional members of staff are often held in high esteem by the young people and do have a positive impact on moral.

We have heard about the Finnish system where there appears to be an MA qualified counsellor in every school and where wrap-around care is provided by a team of people from birth. The participant who told us about this approach clearly identified with this strategy, regarding it as having positive benefits on outcomes for children, and that this multi-agency approach certainly reduces exclusion. This strategy of caring for, rather than excluding, children who face additional challenges seems to be sensible.

Summary of findings

We planned to discover who cares about the education and pastoral support needs of children who have been excluded. We found out that when schools work in conjunction with a range of other professionals, in a manner which includes children and their parents and makes the process comfortable and child led, results are there to be had. Children feel supported, valued and can achieve. We also learned that our agencies appear, at times, to misinterpret the guidance, or simply ignore it – allowing egos, personalities and personal agendas to get in the way of pastoral care. We have found examples of good practice to share with others and also a few challenges, the avoidance of which might just make the difference for some children.

Conclusion – implications for practice

The fundamental aim of our project was to discover what works best for children and young people who have been excluded from education or their local community. Who cares for them? Well, behaviour support staff in schools appear to have a very valuable role to play, as do social workers, educational psychologists and many others; however we were also fortunate in that we picked up many instances of good practice which may actually be able to limit the incidents of exclusion in the first place.

The examples of best practice we have identified can be realistically employed by any school. The ideas that seem to work best for children and young people seem to involve respect, good attitudes and real commitment to raising outcomes for children rather than huge budgets, difficulty or lessening of adult worth. It would seem that what excluded children want (to be listened to and for us to try to understand their

feelings) is relatively easy to implement with very little inconvenience. We do not suggest that children should always get exactly what they want but, at times, a simple acknowledgement by the teams working on behalf of these children that they have been properly heard, can be enough to improve behaviour.

This project has opened lines of enquiry into how excluded children, and those at risk of exclusion, are cared for and how their education is provided. A particular limitation of this study is that when we began to speak to people about our research question we were given lots of information about various challenges that exist, and while they are of interest to us and have an important bearing on the issues surrounding the research question, they do not directly impact on this study. To sum up the thousands upon thousands of words we could write about how people feel about exclusion, the feeling cited by Cairns and Stanway (2004) that 'schools can be places where, if you don't belong you can feel isolated and alone, get picked on for feeling different, feel lost' seems very apt. It is our duty as professionals to work together to reverse this trend once children are identified as at risk of exclusion, rather than add to the feelings of failure that these children surely harbour.

The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

We want England's children and young people's workforce to be respected by peers and valued for the positive difference it makes to children, young people and their families.

We advise and work in partnership with lots of different organisations and people who want the lives of all children and young people to be healthy, happy and fulfilling.

CWDCPLR0809/062