

## Girls and exclusion from school

The numbers of pupils excluded from school have been steadily increasing over recent years. Attention has focused on boys who form the vast majority of those formally excluded. This study, carried out by the New Policy Institute and the Centre for Citizenship Studies in Education, University of Leicester, examines girls' perceptions of school life and of the use of exclusion in its various forms, both official and unofficial. Interviews with girls and a wide range of professionals revealed a complex picture of concerns. The research found that:

- f** Girls are generally not a priority in schools' thinking about behaviour management and school exclusion. Even when concerns were recognised, they were often over-shadowed by the difficulties of managing the much greater numbers of boys.
- f** The 'invisibility' of girls' difficulties has serious consequences for their ability to get help. Since the problem is seen as so small compared with boys, resources are targeted at the latter. However, the nature of the support on offer to girls and their own responses when in difficulty can also lead to them not receiving help.
- f** The nature of help on offer assumes that provision is equally available for both boys and girls. However, many girls are unwilling to take up current forms of support and many providers do not refer girls because they believe provision is inappropriate for girls.
- f** Identification of girls' needs and the subsequent provision of services are compartmentalised. This applies particularly to girls who are pregnant or who have other health or childcare needs. Poor co-ordination of services can leave girls at risk of no one assuming responsibility for their support.
- f** 'Self-exclusion' and internal exclusion (for example, truancy or being removed from class) appear to be widespread.
- f** Many girls interviewed felt that schools use exclusion inconsistently, with clear differences between what teachers classed as acceptable behaviour from boys and girls. Professionals also reported differences in the way boys and girls are disciplined.
- f** Bullying is a serious problem and appears to be a significant factor in girls' decisions to self-exclude. However, bullying amongst girls is not easily recognised and there is often an institutional failure to tackle bullying among girls effectively.

## Background

Nationally girls comprise just 17 per cent of permanent exclusions. As a consequence, girls have been largely overlooked in school exclusion prevention strategies and research. Yet in 1998/99 around 1,800 girls were permanently excluded from school. These recorded permanent exclusions are a small proportion of the total number of girls excluded. Many more girls are excluded either informally or for a fixed period. There has been little research focusing on the experiences and specific needs of girls in relation to their disaffection with education.

There are three additional reasons for the focus on girls:

- There is growing evidence of unofficial and informal exclusions and girls appear more vulnerable to these types of exclusion than boys. Unofficial exclusions remain largely hidden and are absent from official statistics. As a consequence, policy fails to address the problem and few resources are allocated to it.
- There is concern that current exclusion prevention and support strategies do not recognise the particular emotional and developmental needs of girls. Girls' needs, their experiences in school and their aspirations for the future may differ quite significantly from those of their male peers and may result in different behaviour and problems.
- A number of experiences affect girls disproportionately or exclusively and may adversely affect their ability to attend and achieve in school, placing them at greater risk of exclusion. These include pregnancy and caring responsibilities.

### Defining 'exclusion'

The definition of 'exclusion from school' used in this study is deliberately broad. It goes beyond the 'physical' and 'formal' definitions that tend to focus on school procedures and classroom management issues. Girls may become excluded from school either officially or unofficially. Those who have disengaged from learning are effectively excluded, whether or not they have drawn attention to their needs through behavioural problems.

## Girls' experiences of school

Many girls perceived a lack of consistency in relation to formal exclusion. They also suggested that pupils' gender influenced teachers' management of behaviour and the choice of sanctions, including exclusion. They thought that varying rates of exclusion between schools were more to do with how the school managed and supported students than with the students themselves.

The girls also perceived gender differences in responses to authority and experiences of bullying. Girls perceived boys to be more frequently subject to disciplinary sanctions because they tend to present a more direct challenge to authority by engaging in forms of behaviour that are more difficult to ignore in the school setting, such as fighting and overtly physically or verbally aggressive behaviours.

Girls' friendships with each other were a source of support but also a potential source of tension and conflict that sometimes hindered learning or resulted in non-attendance. There was evidence that schools have greater difficulty addressing the psychological bullying that is more typically engaged in by girls.

**"I was bullied at this school for three years ... and the teachers ... I did go to them and my parents as well ... and, like, it helped a bit, but they couldn't suspend her or nothing because she hadn't physically touched me but to me, it wasn't about what she was doing physically ... she was just destroying me mentally."**  
(Nina, Year 11, mainstream school, on fixed-term exclusion)

Girls reported a range of ways in which they coped with difficulties at school but not all of these were helpful. The use of avoidance strategies, such as feigning illness and truancy, is problematic. Clearly, and as the girls themselves appeared to recognise, the long-term consequences of the resulting loss of education are likely to outweigh any immediate benefits. The girls' accounts suggest that they value education and that they do not want to miss out through disaffection and self-exclusion.

The evidence suggests that the official statistics concerning girls' absences from school underestimate the extent of truancy. A considerable number of the girls who were interviewed reported truancy which was unknown to the school.

**"Sometimes, I would go in and get my mark so I'd get a full attendance but after I got my mark I'd go home**

and I'd come back at lunchtime and get my mark and go back home." (Nadine, Year 11, pupil referral unit, permanently excluded pupil)

In combination with evidence of the widespread use of 'internal exclusion' (exclusion from particular classes or subjects), these findings suggest that the needs of a significant number of girls are not being adequately met within current systems.

### Professional perspectives

Girls are not seen as a priority in schools' thinking about behaviour management and exclusion. Throughout the study, a typical response was that girls were 'not a problem'. Such a viewpoint was also evident in many Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Only by exploring a little deeper did widespread concerns begin to emerge. Professionals suggested that girls' greater adaptability to the academic routines of school, conscious use of social skills and different teacher perceptions of similar behaviour based on gender, contributed to the lower permanent exclusion rates of girls and the view that girls are 'not a problem'. The link between criminality and boys' exclusion from school, as well as the widespread perception that girls are doing well academically in school in comparison to boys, may also be contributing.

Whilst the research identified a diverse range of strategies to keep pupils in education, including greater use of further education, provision is largely dominated by boys. As a consequence, not only do many girls feel unwilling to take up the help on offer but many providers do not refer girls since they feel that the provision will be inappropriate for girls. This results in further male over-representation and makes it even more unlikely that girls will get support.

**"I think the biggest issue for girls in our centres is that they are largely male environments. If we didn't have our school refusers who are predominantly girls, we would have some centres where it was almost all boys." (Member of behaviour support team)**

Girls' needs and difficulties are often less visible and more likely to be overlooked than those of their male classmates. Faced with a range of competing pressures, many teachers focus their attention on those whose needs are overt and who present an immediate challenge in the classroom. Girls experiencing difficulties are less likely to engage in

behaviour that attracts the attention of school authorities and support systems. Internalised responses such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and self-harming behaviour can be overlooked or assumed to relate to problems beyond, rather than within, school. Physical and emotional withdrawal is also less likely to be responded to immediately.

**"The difficulties faced by girls are due to them not acting out that much. ... They are not 'in your face'... They are quieter, they tend to stop attending and they often disengage from school... they may only come to attention if they turn to bullying." (Deputy head, mainstream school)**

The pressure of teaching and administration duties as well as the complexity of some difficulties means that, even when they do recognise that a girl is in difficulties, teachers are often not sure of the best way of supporting her. When a student is referred to other agencies, these agencies may only respond to an aspect of the problem, thereby compartmentalising it. Professionals recognise the importance of inter-agency work in tackling school exclusion and the wider problem of social exclusion, but are still encountering some challenges in this way of working.

Service providers identified a number of factors that limit the chances of some girls succeeding at school. These included limited access to educational alternatives, a lack of Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty (EBD) provision for girls, parentally condoned absences, low aspirations, pregnancy, subtle forms of bullying, caring responsibilities and sexual exploitation, for example, pressure to become involved in escort agencies and prostitution.

Many of these manifest themselves in non-attendance and the issue of self-exclusion and girls' 'opting out' was identified as a particular concern. Professionals also suggested that difficulties are occurring at an earlier age than in the past. Professionals and girls themselves generally identified similar problems. Nevertheless, service providers did not recognise girls' concerns about bullying, and the links they made between bullying and exclusion from school, as being particularly significant.

### Conclusion

There appears to be relatively little consideration of how school and LEA pastoral support systems are

meeting the specific needs of girls. A recurring theme throughout the research was the way in which girls' needs are overlooked. While in principle girls and boys have equal access to pastoral support and educational alternatives, resources for disaffected pupils are largely directed towards boys. This is explained partially in terms of the less visible nature of some girls' problems, but also reflects how girls manage problems, some of which may go unnoticed within schools. It may be difficult to detect the stressful circumstances (for example, peer relationship difficulties) but it is also more difficult to detect that a student has withdrawn from learning.

Support for vulnerable girls will help avoid school exclusion which often leads to subsequent social exclusion. This will require both a broadening of our views of exclusion to incorporate a wider range of factors that effectively exclude a pupil from learning and full participation in school life and also a commitment to keeping girls' needs on the education policy agenda.

### About the project

This was an in-depth largely qualitative study focusing on six areas in England. The research involved:

- Focus group and individual interviews with 81 girls of secondary school age drawn from schools and colleges in three LEAs and three Education Action Zones (EAZs). They included girls who were not causing concern in school as well as those who were at risk of exclusion and those who had experienced exclusion in the past. The sample included girls looked after by local authorities and girls from minority ethnic communities. Ten parents were also interviewed.
- Face-to-face interviews with fifty-five service providers across the six areas. These included school, LEA and EAZ personnel and staff working within health, social services and voluntary sector agencies. Information was also sought from a range of alternative education providers including FE colleges, education facilities for pregnant schoolgirls and teenage mothers, and a number of special projects.
- A review of relevant research and literature from government, academics and voluntary organisations working in this area and analysis of

documents such as EAZ Action Plans, Education Development Plans, Behaviour Support Plans and Social Services Children's Services Plans.

Girls who are not attending school as a result of pregnancy, caring duties or other reasons, were included in this study, whether or not they are recorded as truants. The underlying rationale is that individual students are not simply in one of two camps, that is to say, either excluded or included. Exclusion and inclusion need to be seen as part of a continuum, and an individual may move along that continuum at different points in her school life.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Not a problem? Girls and school exclusion** by Audrey Osler, Cathy Street, Marie Lall and Kerry Vincent, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau (ISBN 1 900990 72 5, price £12.95).