

School exclusions: Learning partnerships outside mainstream education

Findings
Informing change

September 2007

This research focuses on two institutions that support children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school, taking into account poverty and multiple disadvantage.

Key points

- The research highlights the importance of *relationships* – between staff and parents and between staff and students who have been permanently excluded from school.
- These relationships help all parties engage or re-engage with educational opportunities, providing the foundation for the personal, social and emotional development of children and young people.
- The work that is carried out in these relationships is also a positive and effective alternative to punitive measures such as ASBOs (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders).
- Work with children and young people is highly dependent on understanding their history and past resentments (such as institutional racism) and taking these into account.
- The approach relies on caring adults who want to develop relationships with these 'hard to reach' individuals, rather than on a specified list of formal procedures. This makes the appointment of the right people to do this job particularly important.
- The approach also relies on staff:
 - being free to take the initiative;
 - having flexible working procedures; and
 - being creative in order to respond to students and their parents.
- Work with children and young people is greatly enhanced if workers can engage with parents. The work with parents relies on a non-judgemental approach with the aim of helping them address challenges in their lives.

The research

By a team from the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University.

Background

Some groups experience disproportionate numbers of permanent exclusions, including those living in poverty, and black and dual-heritage children and young people.

This research looks at possible reasons for this and examines how education and other services can work productively with students and parents who are most directly affected.

Working through relationships with children and young people

The research focuses on two institutions that support children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school (a Key Stage 2 Pupil Referral Unit and a voluntary sector organisation that supports Key Stage 3 and 4 young people). Both institutions work with very 'hard to reach' children, young people and parents. The voluntary sector organisation supports predominantly black and dual-heritage students, who are three times more likely to be excluded than their white peers.

The research highlighted the importance of *relationships* – between staff and parents and between staff and students who have been permanently excluded from school. These relationships helped children and young people engage or re-engage with educational and other opportunities as they provided the foundation for their personal, social and emotional development. Work with young people and children is highly dependent on understanding their past history and working in ways which take that history into account.

Relationship-building includes:

- showing respect for students' feelings;
- avoiding attempts at control which make them feel humiliated (such as shouting);
- listening carefully to their point of view; and
- giving practical help or making constructive suggestions in response to problems with learning or behaviour.

In these ways, workers communicated that they want to understand and to help.

Staff also needed to take into account children and young people's past history and the wider social context of their lives. This includes:

- understanding that children and young people often feel stigmatised, let down and angry as a consequence of what has happened in mainstream school;
- recognition that problematic behaviour is often the result of other challenges in their lives;
- acknowledging feelings of powerlessness to change things; and
- realising the need to address past resentments (such as institutional racism).

Staff worked in ways that would lead to children and young people having positive memories and positive feelings about themselves. Mentors, while remaining in control, also worked in ways that reduced the distance between themselves and the students. The curriculum included multiple opportunities to debate choices and their consequences, emotions and values.

Over time these elements build towards a situation where workers matter to children and young people – they become a 'significant other' in their lives. The affection and respect they feel for these adults makes it more likely they will listen and respond to the help they are given; they believe these adults are 'on their side' and want the best for them.

Who carries out this work?

The work relies on caring adults who want, and are able, to develop relationships with 'hard to reach' individuals, rather than on formal procedures. This makes the appointment of the right people to do this job particularly important. The approach also relies on staff having the freedom to take the initiative in order to respond to students and parents. This requires flexibility in working procedures and creativity on the part of the workers involved.

Staff must be good listeners and intelligent observers. They need to be able to stay calm in circumstances where there is verbal and physical violence. They need to reflect on their work and be interested in human behaviour. This is essential to an approach which relies on learning from the relationships they have with children, young people and their parents, and on being willing to review and renew their approach according to individual needs.

The approach depends on a team of staff who trust and are supportive of one another. This is essential in a context where staff experience intense emotional demands. The care that staff members show to one another, and the attention they pay to students and their parents, help to build an atmosphere children and young people want to be part of.

Work with parents

Work with children and young people is greatly enhanced if workers can engage with their parents. The work with parents relies on a non-judgemental approach to address the challenges parents also face. The partnerships that develop help to improve the capacity of students and their parents to address challenges in their own lives. It is recognised that parents face many difficulties associated with poverty and disadvantage, in addition to having a child who has been permanently excluded from school. From the first point of contact this informs a 'no blame' approach to parents. Responsiveness of staff to parental concerns provides reassurance and they begin to see mentors and teachers as 'on their side'. This allows parents to feel safe in talking about problems they have and encourages them to let mentors into their homes.

Practical support is provided in relation to their child's behaviour and in relation to wider social and emotional problems, including liaising with other agencies. This work makes it more likely that parents will, in turn, support the work of mentors and teachers so that a consistent approach to problematic behaviour can be established. When problems occur, parents are also much less likely to feel 'stuck in the middle' between their child and school and less likely to be defensive or aggressive in their responses.

The work with parents allows staff new freedoms in the ways they work with children and young people, as parents trust they are working in their child's best interests. This, in turn, allows some relief of pressures at home. Children and young people are also greatly relieved when school and home are no longer 'fighting'. This helps to reduce feelings of being caught between difficult events at school and at home. In this regard, it is crucial that students see adults who respect their parents, spending time with them when there are no problems, avoiding criticism and blame, and in the process avoiding implicit denigration of them.

Over time, work with parents helps children and young people feel they no longer need to defend their parents, or lie to 'cover' for them, or keep secrets about them. One of the ways in which children and young people develop trust in caring adults is in observing these adults' responses to their parents and seeing that they are not shocked or frightened by them. This makes it more likely that students will want to talk to staff.

In working closely with parents, children and young people, staff gain insights into the circumstances of the students they work with and their responses to what is going on at home. Rather than dismiss school as 'alien' because it does not have relevance to their lives, children and young people are more likely to maintain an open mind about what is on offer.

Further research

Some questions remain to be answered:

- What are the current pressures on teachers in terms of providing social and emotional support to students living with poverty and multiple disadvantage, and how might they use and adapt the approach that is described here?
- What challenges do mainstream schools face in working more closely with parents, taking into account poverty and multiple disadvantage?
- How can researchers better understand and address the specific and sensitive causes of disaffection evident in this study (such as institutional racism)?

About the project

The work was entirely qualitative in nature. The researchers developed six case studies of children, young people and their families. These included observations in a number of sites, multiple interviews, phone contact and other informal meetings. The researchers also carried out extended observation in two institutions that support permanently excluded students. All key personnel in the two institutions were interviewed (sometimes several times) and the researchers carried out numerous 'mini-interviews' with students and staff in these institutions. Nineteen further interviews were also conducted with parents of current or ex-pupils.

For further information

Please contact Jo Frankham for more information. Email: jo.frankham@manchester.ac.uk, tel. 0161 275 3338.

The full report, **School exclusions: Learning partnerships outside mainstream education** by Jo Frankham, Deon Edwards-Kerr, Neil Humphrey and Lorna Roberts, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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