

Mapping the alternatives to permanent exclusion

Findings
Informing change

September 2007

Government policy in England entitles all young people aged 14 to 19 to a broad and balanced curriculum, with personalised education and training. This research investigates how this policy is being carried out in two Midlands educational authorities through alternative programmes for young people who are permanently excluded from school, or at risk of permanent exclusion.

Key points

- A variety of programmes are needed to cater for excluded young people, who have diverse interests, academic capabilities and aspirations.
- In the successful programmes studied, staff:
 - established good relations with young people;
 - allowed them some say in decisions;
 - offered them real options for further study or work; and
 - provided a rich mix of activities.
- However, the life chances of young people in some programmes were limited by:
 - An assumption that all excluded pupils need vocational and basic life skills training. Academic options were often limited.
 - Qualifications offered not always being recognised by colleges. Many young people had certificates which did not easily translate into mainstream education or training.
 - Students and their families having little say in the way they were moved from mainstream schooling into alternative programmes.
- All young people under 16 must be enrolled in school, college or an alternative provision. However, not all young people were getting this entitlement. Where the local authority provided the alternative programme, excluded students were highly likely to be enrolled full-time, but those still in school were often in part-time recreational or vocational programmes, for fewer hours than policy required.
- Local authorities kept good data on permanently excluded students, but there was no centralised up-to-date database of alternative programmes. Nor was there a standardised framework for collecting data on who attended programmes and how often.
 - School and Connexions data was focused on individual monitoring, and the lack of aggregation across programmes meant it was impossible to say 'who got what'.
 - Local authorities and schools could not ensure the quality of programmes, develop reliable plans for the future or monitor whether young people had access to a broad and balanced curriculum.

The research

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Background

Alternative provision for excluded students falls into two broad types:

Core provision - where a young person is on the roll. This means that this is the young person's home base. The core provider has a legal responsibility for ensuring that the young person has an appropriate programme and they typically offer some academic subjects and some social and life skills training. Core provision is often a pupil referral unit.

Specialist provision – where a young person is offered a part-time programme but is not on the roll. Specialist providers typically offer vocational and recreational programmes. They offer places to both alternative core providers and schools.

Alternative core providers tailor a 'package' of programmes for each young person. Schools tend to use specialist provision, either to provide things they cannot, or as a measure to prevent young people from being permanently excluded.

The notion of entitlement

The study took as its starting point the principle that in order to ensure access to and equity of entitlement, there needs to be a way to monitor:

- what is on offer;
- who it is offered to;
- where this takes place;
- who takes up different programmes; and
- what the effects are for the young people involved.

This kind of monitoring requires not just data about individuals but also aggregated information about the young people according to age, gender, race, ethnicity, language background and cultural heritage, disability and socio-economic status. Policy-makers would then know who gets what.

Entitlements in alternative provision

The study found that young people's access to and experience of education was directly affected by the nature of the field of alternative provision. There were also some specific barriers to access and participation.

The nature of the field

Over the course of the year studied, there were quite significant changes in the number, type and location of specialist programmes.

- Many specialist providers were dependent on national funding schemes and said that they were 'tied to' national regulations which meant that what they did was not totally suitable for local needs. They also had to spend time getting funding instead of delivering programmes.
- Core providers reported frustration because specialist programmes on which they relied could lose funding at short notice, leaving them inadequate time to find replacement services.
- The majority of alternative programmes were small. As a result, their staff often changed frequently and they tended to feel isolated and had fewer opportunities for professional development than staff in colleges and local authority programmes.
- Young people and core providers expressed concern about the implications of this for the development of trusting relationships and high-quality programmes.

The field of alternative provision is organisationally mixed. Alternative core and specialist programmes were offered by:

- organisations, such as schools and colleges, which were not accountable to local authorities;
- national and regional organisations and charities working according to their own priorities as well as those of various policy initiatives;
- individual entrepreneurs; and
- local authorities.

This mix led to multiple goals and frameworks for data collection, and different areas of responsibility and accountability. No single body had responsibility for overall tracking and monitoring, forward planning or quality assurance of alternative provision in the Midlands area. Some schools and alternative core providers were taking steps to institute their own quality assurance processes. This could prove to be a problem for specialist providers, who might find themselves with multiple frameworks to meet. It was also an inefficient use of time and resources for alternative core providers.

Access and equity issues

The study identified some key issues for equality of access to alternative provision.

- *The lack of availability of suitable programmes*
 - There was no local database through which trends in ‘supply and demand’ could be analysed, or new programmes planned.
 - In the absence of an up-to-date database of programmes, core providers relied on their own networks to develop packages, meaning that young people were almost entirely dependent on the experiences and contacts of their provider.
 - Specialist providers offered places on a forward purchase basis. This provided them with financial security but also favoured core providers who could afford to bulk buy places early. Young people in those services often had fewer options since they had to do what had been purchased. By contrast, pupils in services that had not bought places in advance often could not gain entry.

Researcher: “So how many places do the PRUs [Pupil Referral Units] reserve?”

Provider: “One of them’s done thirty, one of them’s done twenty and the other one’s done twenty-five. All of them had filled their places by October and all of them came back asking for more places and I had to say ‘no’.”

- More often than not, there were simply more young people than places.
- *A mismatch between those entitled to be enrolled in alternative provision and the actual programmes*
 - The majority of young people in alternative provision were white working class boys. The minority of girls often had little choice of activity. Programme staff reported difficulties in getting funding for single-sex options.
 - There seemed to be a mismatch between local concerns about the attendance and achievement of Afro-Caribbean young people and their numbers in alternative programmes.
- *The lack of choice for young people and their families and carers*
 - Once in a suitable core provision, young people were generally given a say in what they did, but getting to that situation was more problematic.

- Exclusion procedures upset many young people and their parents or carers. The study found several instances where parents or carers had to make considerable efforts to get their child into a suitable alternative.

Parent: “Just before the summer holidays we had like six weeks. I think I must have been on the phone every week to find out what was happening. But I was told that so-and-so was on holiday and then that I had to get in touch with Behavioural Support ... but ‘we had to send the referral’. So I said, ‘Give me the number and I will refer him myself’ and I got in touch with Behavioural Support and they contacted me within a couple of weeks and said that they would get somebody out to see us, blah, blah, blah. And I think it was only through me keeping going at them that we finally got something sorted.”

- Young people tended to make their views known by refusing to do what had been planned for them. They were often reluctant to travel to other neighbourhoods to access a programme unavailable in their own location. Mixing rural and urban youth, or putting together those from different cultural backgrounds, was often problematic.
- On some occasions young people and their families found their own work experience placement but the placement then struggled to meet regulations.
- Young people were generally not helped to make sense of the qualifications on offer in alternative programmes.

Young person: “It’s kind of hard to get into college with OCNs because you need GCSEs. I’ve applied to places like College A and College B and they’ve said if I can’t get GCSEs then I will have to do GCSEs there. And then I phoned College C and they said they take OCNs so I’ll probably go there ... it’s my feeder college.”

Researcher: “What are you going to do when you go there?”

Young person: “A-level History.”

Researcher: “Do you do anything related to History now?”

Young person: “No.”

Building on good practice

What works for young people excluded from school is relatively well known – small classes, negotiated activities, flexible approaches, extended care and meeting the whole range of young people’s needs and

aspirations. The organisations involved in this study showed tenacity in chasing up young people and refusing to give up on them. This was often in stark contrast to what had happened before.

Provider: “I think a lot of the time they’ve just been lost in the system which is quite disappointing really. And while they’ve been out of school nobody has been actively involved with them, like a welfare officer.”

The case studies of good practice found in this research were providers characterised by carefully selected, well-qualified, and well-supported staff, high levels of trust among services and sound self-evaluation processes. This kind of provision is not cheap and expanding such provision clearly presents a challenge for local authorities.

The study also found a number of parents and carers who could, if there was an appropriate structure, provide sound ‘user’ advice to local authorities and alternative core providers.

Policy implications

The study suggests that alternative provision can be understood as a relatively unregulated field in which there is a great range of organisation sizes, inspection regimes, data collection frameworks and priorities. These factors combine to limit the development of comprehensive local forward planning.

It would be in the interests of the most vulnerable young people if their needs and interests were more integrated into the 14 to 19 education agenda, and not seen as a welfare matter. The needs of young people excluded from school should be made central to the work of all education providers. This would require more dialogue and cooperation between alternative providers and schools. It would also mean systematically building on the good practice that exists.

The researchers conclude that if an educational entitlement for all those aged 14 to 19 is to be assured, there must be further development of processes for monitoring and auditing the participation of all students, including those excluded from school. This may mean new roles for local authorities and a shift away from a single focus on individual systems of tracking, towards an aggregated data set. This would allow national and local authorities to answer the question of who gets what and with what effects.

About the project

The study used a mix of methods including statistical mapping, survey, ethnographic observation, and interviews. The researchers conducted 85 interviews with a range of policy and programme staff, young people and their parents. Phase one aimed to identify, survey and map all the alternative programmes in the two Midlands local authorities. Phase two involved six case studies of good practice. Fieldwork ran from December 2005 to July 2006.

For further information

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The full report, **Mapping the alternatives to permanent exclusion** by Patricia Thomson and Lisa Russell, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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

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