

Inter-agency working to prevent school exclusion

Policies to prevent school exclusion advocate joined-up working. Scotland has a long history of inter-agency working in relation to vulnerable young people. This study, by Gwynedd Lloyd and Joan Stead, University of Edinburgh, and Andrew Kendrick, University of Dundee, focused on school-based inter-agency meetings in three local authorities. The project explored issues of effectiveness for young people, their perceptions of success, those of their parents, and of relevant professionals. It found:

- f** School-based inter-agency meetings were central to effective working to avoid or reduce exclusion from school. There were strengths and weaknesses in the different models identified.
- f** Case-based meetings involved participation by young people and parents/carers. Combined case/strategic meetings fostered positive working relationships and wider creative approaches.
- f** When young people and their parents/carers attended meetings they often found them difficult but felt it was important to be there. There were issues about confidentiality in meetings where they were not present.
- f** Irregular attendance by key personnel was an issue in all local authorities. Staff participation in meetings increased awareness of the roles and responsibilities of other professionals and fostered shared values; there were still some barriers to working together.
- f** In addition to school-based inter-agency meetings, inter-agency working took a number of forms, including assessment and planning; direct joint working by professionals of different agencies; and multi-agency working where more than one agency worked directly with young people, but not necessarily jointly.
- f** There was evidence of effective support for young people, which reduced exclusion, but there was no single answer. Successful support was built on the individual circumstances and views of the young people.
- f** Some young people with very complex difficulties were seen as 'high maintenance' pupils, continuing to need a considerable level of support. Being flexible, imaginative and just not giving up were crucial.
- f** The style of support affected how it was received by young people and their families. Most saw support as effective when professionals were informal, equitable and non-judgemental. Professional role was not seen as important.

Background

Government policies at Westminster and the Scottish Executive emphasise social justice and inclusion. Disciplinary exclusion from school is viewed as part of the wider problem of social exclusion and has been targeted for specific action. Education authorities and schools are expected to reduce their current levels of exclusion. However, recent education legislation and guidance in Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, still allows for both disciplinary exclusion and for out-of-school placement of pupils whose behaviour is considered to be unacceptable, either in terms of the welfare of the individual pupil or the welfare of the wider school community.

Most authorities in Scotland, while continuing to use exclusion, have long-established policies and procedures designed to reduce exclusion and to encourage more effective inter-agency working to support children and young people in their family and in their local school. Most pupils who are

excluded temporarily in Scotland return to school after a short period and are not excluded again. Such young people may be discussed briefly in school-based inter-agency meetings but the reduction of this kind of exclusion tends to lie more in the disciplinary structures, the curriculum and pastoral care of schools. This study looked at inter-agency working in relation to young people considered to be at greater risk and to require more planned intervention and support from school-based inter-agency meetings.

The whole area of inter-agency working has often been described as a 'terminological quagmire'. In this study it seemed important to clarify the meaning of many commonly used terms (see Box 1).

School-based inter-agency meetings

In the three case study authorities, these meetings were clearly central to the support of vulnerable pupils, providing inter-agency assessment, planning and review of strategies. The meetings had a broad role in relation to *all* pupils considered as needing support – they were not just about exclusion. Participants valued these meetings for providing a holistic view of young people and for generating support, resources, shared responsibility, creativity and flexibility. Participants saw meetings as widening their knowledge of other agencies and professions and as a forum for sharing skills, ideas and approaches.

All the meetings reviewed and explored existing strategies as well as identifying and recommending new resources. Sometimes schools were looking for advice and/or information from other professionals. However, meetings could also be part of a process or strategy resulting in exclusion/removal from the register.

Different types of meetings

In one local authority, school-based inter-agency meetings were case-based (ie they only discussed individual pupils); in the other two, their purpose included strategic planning of service delivery as well as individual case discussion. Case-based meetings increased involvement by young people and parents/carers. Combined case/strategic meetings discussed and planned wider service delivery in relation to vulnerable young people. They had a permanent core membership with a history of working together. For example, they might plan programmes for helping pupils who had experienced problems in primary school move onto secondary school or might discuss issues currently of concern in

Box 1: Terminology

Inter-agency working - when more than one agency work together in a *planned and formal way*.

Joined-up - deliberate and co-ordinated planning and working which take account of different policies and varying agency practices and values. This can refer to thinking or to practice or policy development.

Joint working - professionals from more than one agency working directly together on a project, for example, teachers and social work staff offering joint group work. School-based inter-agency meetings may involve *joint* planning, which reflects *joined-up* thinking.

Multi-agency working - more than one agency working with a young person, with a family or on a project (but *not necessarily jointly*). It may be *concurrent*, sometimes as result of *joint planning* or it may be *sequential*.

Single agency working - where only one agency is involved may still be the consequence of inter-agency decision-making and therefore may be part of a joined-up plan.

Multi-professional working - the working together of staff with different professional backgrounds and training.

Inter-agency communication - information sharing between agencies – formal and informal, written or oral.

the school neighbourhood, such as delinquent activities.

There were clear advantages to the combined meetings in the positive working relationships of the members, their ability to be imaginative and creative in both case-based and more strategic thinking. However, there were issues of confidentiality when young people were discussed in case/strategic meetings when professionals not directly involved were present. However, in meetings observed such professionals often made helpful suggestions or offers of support.

Participation in the meetings

The issue of young people and their parents participating in decision-making is an important one. All three authorities had policies promoting the involvement of young people and their parents in decision-making. Only one authority chose to do this through inviting parents and pupils to participate directly in school-based inter-agency meetings; the other councils had strategies to inform and involve parents and young people outwith the meetings.

Young people and their parents/carers who participated in the meetings valued their involvement, even though they did not always understand what was happening or the language used by some professionals. They sometimes found meetings intimidating or upsetting, but nonetheless indicated a clear preference for participation.

In the other two authorities, pupils and parents often met with a sub-group of staff before or after meetings. Some felt they would prefer to be at the full meetings, others said that they would find this uncomfortable. Several young people who had not attended meetings were unclear about what had been discussed.

Only those professionals with direct involvement usually attended case-based meetings with the young person. Combined case/strategic meetings had a core of professionals, such as senior school staff and representatives from joint-funded initiatives, social work, voluntary agencies, and community police, plus case-specific personnel, such as a young person's social worker or guidance teacher. The irregular attendance of some professionals, especially pressured social workers, was an issue in all authorities. Mental health staff tended not to participate.

Direct work with young people

The young people in this study were all identified by their schools as examples of how the school staff worked well together with other agencies in

preventing or reducing disciplinary exclusion. They were clearly not all picked because their school believed issues had been resolved. Several of the young people were still facing significant difficulties and their schools were still having considerable trouble dealing with these. So some of the work can be seen more realistically as being about *addressing* but not necessarily *solving* problems.

Sometimes the plans agreed in the meetings involved the work of a single agency; sometimes they involved a complex package of support from several agencies. For some young people, one specific intervention seemed to be enough to help them to resolve some issues or to provide enough support for them to remain in school. For others, particularly those with more complex difficulties both in and out of school, a range of different options had often been tried, sometimes as part of a package of support, sometimes sequentially with new ideas being tried as others seemed unsuccessful.

Whether and how the support provided by different agencies and professionals was valued by those interviewed varied according to a number of factors, some to do with the individual circumstances and preferences of the young person and their family and some with the level and the quality of the support and the style of the worker.

Conclusion

Inter-agency work contributed to supporting pupils by:

- providing a joined-up, child-centred perspective on young people's lives;
- offering a supportive forum for staff to exchange views and generate ideas;
- widening awareness of other strategies and resources outside school;
- assessing and planning for individual needs;
- planning the contribution of a range of professionals;
- reviewing and revising plans and developing additional or different approaches;
- providing an avenue to out-of-school provision;
- supporting school staff to keep trying with challenging pupils;
- supporting staff in relation to school management or colleagues over issues of exclusion;
- encouraging professionals to respond to the views and experiences of young people.

The researchers conclude that, if the aim of inter-agency interventions is to keep pupils at least partly in

their mainstream school, then these strategies were effective for most of the pupils in this study. However, if other criteria are used to denote success, such as *full* inclusion in school life and access to the whole range of the curriculum then the picture becomes less clear. There was a tenuous connection with school for a number of those with complex difficulties in and out of school. However, the schools were clearly still trying to find ways of supporting them. A few young people were still experiencing occasional short-term periods of exclusion.

It seemed that the schools were really making an effort to hold on to these young people, not only because they were trying to reduce their exclusion figures, but because they had a sense of the difficulties faced by the young people and a willingness to keep trying. A major contribution of the meetings was that they promoted an understanding of the complex and sometimes very distressing outside world of children's lives. School staff valued the support from other professionals, particularly when the school was holding onto very challenging young people and there was pressure from other school staff to exclude them. When a plan did not seem to be working, the meetings offered an opportunity to develop other strategies or identify further resources.

Professional staff were knowledgeable about a range of possible approaches and possible resources. However, identifying appropriate support could never be a simple matter of matching resources to problems. The history and preferences of individual young people were key to the effectiveness of such support. Thus the involvement of the young people and their families needs to be central to the process of inter-agency decision-making both in order to protect their rights and to ensure that effective strategies can be developed to avoid the potentially damaging consequences of school exclusion.

About the study

The research design and methodology was collaboratively developed in partnership with three Scottish local authorities, urban and rural, all with a history of inter-agency working.

Each authority identified two secondary schools where there was established inter-agency practice. The six schools were publicly funded, comprehensive secondary schools managed by the local authority.

Four were neighbourhood schools; two schools were Catholic drawing from a wider catchment area. The six schools varied widely in their socio-economic composition. The schools identified thirty individual case-study pupils for whom inter-agency initiatives were seen as effective in preventing or reducing exclusion.

Interviews were carried out with these young people, parents, school staff, other professionals who were directly involved with these young people, and senior personnel in each authority (a total of 150 people interviewed). School and local authority policy documents were analysed and school-based inter-agency meetings observed.

How to get further information

The full report, 'Hanging on in there': A study of inter-agency work to prevent school exclusion in three local authorities by Gwynedd Lloyd, Joan Stead and Andrew Kendrick, is published for the Foundation by the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau (ISBN 1 900990 68 7, price £11.95).