



The role of social services in maintaining children in school

The increasing numbers of children and young people excluded from school have been seen largely as an education issue; concern has focused on the decision to exclude children or reintegrate them back into school. An alternative perspective is to consider how children can be maintained in school through early intervention and how other agencies can support such an approach. This study, by Jeni Vernon and Ruth Sinclair at the National Children's Bureau, looked specifically at the contribution of social services departments (SSDs) to supporting vulnerable children in school. It found:

- f** In recent years, SSDs have demonstrated a heightened awareness of their responsibilities to children out of or at risk of being out of school and have become increasingly involved in meeting their needs.
- f** This involvement is not confined solely to children looked after by the local authority but to a wider group of children in need. Furthermore, many of the more recent developments aim to prevent children's exclusion from school.
- f** The most active SSDs attributed their heightened activity to a recent enhanced spirit of collaboration between Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and SSDs (although this relationship is both complex and subtle.)
- f** LEA personnel acknowledged and valued the potential contribution of a social work approach to maintaining children in school but had reservations about SSDs' ability to do this as part of their core services and because of the reactions of parents. SSD staff often expressed similar reservations.
- f** Families involved in initiatives valued the mediating role and support that professionals adopting a social work approach provided. School personnel likewise found that initiatives provided a range of support that was not otherwise available.
- f** Although the evidence is as yet limited, the six initiatives studied suggest that social work might make a valuable contribution to keeping children in school. The researchers conclude that the challenge for SSDs lies in translating the messages of these initiatives into organising and delivering at the local level. Improved liaison between schools and local SSD offices will be central to this.

Background

This study was conducted against a backcloth of mounting concern about the numbers of children out of school and evidence that children were out of school from an increasingly young age. Previous research has focused on quantifying the scale of the problem and identifying those groups at greatest risk. Such research has demonstrated the frequent coexistence of difficulties both at school and at home. Coverage of the issue, however, has tended to portray it as a matter for education to address and to focus on ways of reintegrating children back into school.

In contrast, the focus of this study was how children can be maintained in school and, in particular, the contribution that social services departments can make. The most immediately obvious role for SSDs lies with children looked after by the local authority. However, in addition, the 1989 Children Act gives SSDs statutory responsibilities in relation to preventive work. More specifically, their duty under Section 17 to support families in the upbringing of their children by the provision of services to 'children in need' makes it clear that SSDs have a remit for preventive work in relation to school-related difficulties which extends beyond 'looked-after' children.

Increased activity by social services

Questionnaire responses from SSDs in England and Wales revealed that, from the mid-nineties, SSDs have become increasingly engaged in activities raised by concerns about children out of school. Some SSDs were doing more than others. In addition, the pattern of activity was not uniform, with a range of different policy and practice forms.

These included reference to children out of (or at risk of being out of) school in Children's Services Plans, the setting-up of joint panels to discuss the cases of individual children, the development of joint protocols, joint training initiatives and a range of frontline service initiatives spanning the pre-school stage up to and including mid and late adolescence. Responses indicated a large number of projects planned for introduction over the course of the next few months.

A change of direction

Although many of the reported initiatives did relate to children looked after by the local authority, there

is a growing trend for SSDs to extend their brief to the wider group of children with school-related difficulties. An increasing number of SSDs were channelling their energies into developing initiatives with a preventive focus, aiming at early intervention to avoid exclusion later on. These initiatives were often undertaken in collaboration with the LEA and other agencies. Further features were that they targeted the younger child (those in the early years of secondary school, primary school, and preschool) and that, as well as providing support to the child and/or family, they aimed to explore the potential for supporting and encouraging liaison with schools.

What makes it possible

Despite longstanding professional differences between education and social services departments, key personnel in a sample of the more active SSDs attributed the development of a more preventive approach to an enhanced spirit of collaboration between themselves and the LEA. However, even when the same circumstances applied in different authorities, responses varied and the resulting pattern of development is therefore uneven. For example, statutory obligations such as the requirement to produce Children's Services Plans and pressure to address the issue of education and 'looked-after' children were often cited as being influential in the development of collaboration. Yet these apply to all authorities and all authorities are not at even broadly similar stages of development.

The research suggests that having a structure for collaboration can be very important. It provides an opportunity for interaction, resulting in an increased understanding and appreciation of the other department's role and creating a climate conducive to collaboration. Notwithstanding the importance of structures and positive attitudes, the research further indicates that a commitment to grasping and exploiting all opportunities for a collaborative approach is crucial to the development of collaboration.

Perceptions of the potential contribution of SSDs

Elected members and officers in both social services and education felt that a social work approach could be of great value in helping to maintain children in school, in particular by working closely with families.

However, there were reservations about SSDs' ability to deliver such a service. First, both LEA and SSD personnel referred to the pressure on SSDs arising from child protection work; this was felt to leave them with very limited resources for preventive work with families. Second, LEA members and officers were concerned about the negative image of childcare social work. Such was the stigma attached to involvement with these services that respondents doubted parents' willingness to accept social work support when problems arose.

What was valuable about specific initiatives

The clear message from parents involved in the six specific initiatives reviewed was that for a range of reasons parents often require someone to act as a mediator between themselves and school. School personnel also acknowledged that this was often necessary. Parents were largely unaware that the person who had been performing this role on their behalf was invariably a social worker, or someone using social work skills, as project staff rarely referred to themselves as social workers. Likewise related professionals, and especially school personnel, frequently drew attention to the sharp contrast in their experience of the service provided by project staff and that available through their local SSD office. In particular, they welcomed the fact that project staff worked with the family situation, that they could provide support in school to both staff and children and, finally, that in situations of stress for the child, they were sufficiently flexible to be able to provide the child with a necessary, but temporary and brief, cooling-off period.

Conclusion

Collaboration at the frontline

The overall message emanating from the - as yet limited - experience of the six initiatives was that there is indeed scope for a social work contribution in maintaining children in school.

That this contribution is seen to be available through 'projects' rather than through SSD local offices has implications for the future development of SSD preventive work at the local level. The research suggests that in developing this aspect of their work, SSDs need to consider the organisation and delivery

of services at the very local level. It also highlights that much greater attention needs to be devoted to ensuring effective liaison between schools and the local operational units of SSDs.

Wider policy implications

Children's school difficulties have recently been described as a 'joined-up problem' requiring 'joined-up solutions'. This research suggests that one such solution is more effective liaison between schools and local SSD offices. This, in turn, has implications for local government more generally, as well as for central government. For the former, it raises questions about the extent to which schools are involved in existing planning structures for children, such as those developed around Children's Services Plans and Education Development Plans. For the latter, it suggests that guidance is essential on the respective roles of and the interrelationship between the various plans concerning children and young people now required by different government departments.

About the study

The research was conducted in three interrelated phases during 1997/1998:

First, a questionnaire was sent to all SSDs in England and Wales inquiring about their activities in relation to children out of or at risk of being out of school. This obtained a response rate of over 70 per cent;

Second, on the evidence of 'innovative' and/or 'joint' work with the LEA, members and officers of both the LEA and the SSD from 18 authorities were interviewed about what facilitates and what constrains joint working, and how each saw the potential contribution of SSDs to maintaining children in school.

Third, six 'innovative' developments in which SSDs were involved were reviewed: by examining documentation and interviews with children, families, staff of projects and related professionals, such as school staff.

The intention in both samples was to include a diversity of authorities, of approaches and of innovative developments and then to assess the common messages.

How to get further information

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The full report, *Maintaining Children in School: The contribution of Social Services Departments* by Jeni Vernon and Ruth Sinclair, is the National Children's Bureau price £9.95