

School exclusion and transition into adulthood in African-Caribbean communities

In spite of recent improvements in the school exclusion statistics for African-Caribbean children, they are still around three times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than white pupils. Given the increasing importance of education in achieving a secure future, this study set out to investigate the impact of exclusion on a sample of 33 African-Caribbean young people who had been supported by voluntary organisations, to discover whether and how they had overcome their experiences of school exclusion. The study found that:

- While not a representative sample, all but three of the excluded pupils were in education or employment at the time of interview.
- For many, exclusion acted as a 'critical moment', making them reassess what they had been doing and renew their determination to succeed in getting qualifications for finding work.
- While they acknowledged the detrimental effects of exclusion, they had still aspired to continue their education and were optimistic about finding work.
- Exclusion had a significant impact not only on the young person but also on their families; in some cases it appeared to lead to family breakdown.
- The young people reported considerable variation in the provision of alternative education after exclusion and three were temporarily left without any immediate educational provision. This contributed in some cases to an involvement in criminal activities.
- Even if they acknowledged that something they had done had led to their exclusion, the young people generally expressed an overwhelming sense of injustice, exacerbated by their belief that punishments were more severe for black pupils than for white pupils.
- Young people had found the support provided by family, friends and the voluntary sector crucial to their successful transitions into education and employment. However, these organisations were not funded to provide this support.



Background

In spite of a recent improvement in exclusion statistics for African-Caribbean children they are still more likely to be excluded than white pupils. African-Caribbean girls are up to four times more likely to be permanently excluded than white girls, and boys with African-Caribbean heritage are up to 15 times more likely to be excluded than white boys, depending on locality. With only 15 per cent of permanently excluded young people being reintegrated into mainstream school, successful transition into adulthood, employment and independence for most of these young people is unlikely.

It has long been noted that there is a link between those who have been excluded from school and social exclusion in later life. Given the increasing importance of education to successful youth transitions, this study set out to investigate the impact of school exclusion on the experience of transition for African-Caribbean young people and to find out what strategies they developed to achieve successful transitions.

Through interviews, the research focused on the perspectives of 33 young people, their families or carers and associated community organisations, aiming to give them a voice in the debate about exclusion, inclusion and transitions.

What the interviews revealed

In interviews, even where the young people acknowledged that something they had done had led to their exclusion, they expressed an overwhelming sense of injustice. This was exacerbated by the belief that punishment was more severe for black pupils than it was for white pupils.

“They play the white kids against the black ones, being a white child or something, the black child gets in trouble for it and the white child gets away with it, you see them do it and the black child gets in trouble for it.” (Earl, 18, Nottingham)

The experience made them conscious of the fact that race would affect the way they were seen by others and that the significance of their racial identity in their experience of exclusion was very likely a foretaste of experiences they would have in wider society. However, despite misgivings about the behaviour of teachers and the school’s attitude, most still valued education and wanted to return to school to continue their education and be with their friends. At the time of being interviewed, almost half had gained some qualifications and two-thirds were in further education. Only three were unemployed.

In spite of several policy recommendations to ensure young people receive adequate educational provision after exclusion, only a few of those interviewed received any immediate provision. This state of educational limbo left them with nothing to do and nowhere to go. This led to some getting involved in criminal activities.

“It’s hard because being out of school leads to committing crime because you’re out of school and ain’t got nothing to do ... and what I’m saying is that the kind of person I am, I am easily misled by friends ... because I’m free ... I don’t live at home with my mum, I live in a children’s home.” (Will, 15, London)

All interviewees described exclusion as a traumatic experience which led to a loss of dignity and self-respect. For those in care, being excluded had been particularly distressing. However, this loss of self-worth was an immediate and temporary reaction. In the vast majority of cases, it was followed by the development of a resilient sense of self and a positive black identity that motivated young people to disprove official expectations of them, seeking instead to create and realise their own aspirations.

“I am going to put my head down and get a career in music, and get a proper job.” (Earl, 18, Nottingham)

In some cases, the experience had a damaging effect on the young person’s relationships with family members but on the whole they reported that their families believed in and emotionally supported them. Support was also found in relationships with friends, from sympathetic teachers, social workers, voluntary groups, the church and black community.

An overarching theme was that the exclusion represented a critical moment in their lives, one that had created a change and awareness in their attitudes to issues around exclusion, racism and empowerment. This critical moment also led to young people becoming determined to change their behaviour in order to attain educational qualifications and hence prove their worth. All acknowledged that this was only possible with the support of family and friends, from their communities, sympathetic teachers, social workers, agency workers and mentors, religious groups and alternative sites of education and schooling.

For the families of the young people, the experience of exclusion was as painful as it was for the young people themselves.

“I found it a terrible, terrible, terrible time, I found the whole thing really, really traumatic ... I don't know, it was the initial shock of him being excluded to begin with ... it was very traumatic for me, I was nervous, I felt very nervous at the time ... but I knew on the outward I had to be strong, I had to go about the right channels and look at the different means to help him with the appeal, but on my quiet moments I felt within myself like a wreck.” (Mother of 15-year-old Roger, London)

Families had largely believed the young person's version of events leading up to the exclusion and expressed their support by: helping them with learning, and accessing and using resources; acting as advocates; providing positive emotional support and expressing their belief in the young person. Most had held positive views about the young person's school before the exclusion. However, the experience of appeals and panel meetings had led them to develop negative views about the educational system, even though they continued to believe in the value of education. Where the young person was left in a state of educational limbo, some relatives had sought to empower themselves through seeking help from voluntary community organisations, through the process of appeals against the exclusion, and by demanding educational rights for the young people.

“Every human being has rights ... so I had to find out Tamara's rights in school, my rights as her parent, what I can do for her. So once I knew those, I then know what route to go down.” (Mother of 15-year-old Tamara, London)

On the whole, family members found the support from statutory resources to be inadequate but viewed support from voluntary organisations as particularly beneficial. Voluntary organisations not only provided emotional support and advice for both the young person and the relative, but also helped with appeal meetings. Extended family members were also a valuable source of help, assistance and guidance.

None of the agencies whose representatives were interviewed had been set up specifically to help young people who had been excluded from school. Most had only short-term funding and workers (some of whom had themselves been excluded from school) were extremely dedicated to their jobs, often working long hours. The types of support offered by the representatives of the agencies interviewed included: practical help, such as providing an alternative learning site; helping with reintegration into mainstream education; giving advice about careers and employment; and assistance with advocacy and representation. In addition, most of them provided emotional support and guidance and aimed to help the young people form positive identities for themselves and improve family relationships.

“It's about building parents as well. You need to give them awareness. Most people have two or three children. So if the eldest child is having problems, at some point the younger one may experience something. Just the fact they have the same family name, going through the same school. So if you can empower that parent to deal with the situation they can protect the second child and the third child ... so we look at the situation and try to encourage parents.” (Senior Community Development Officer, Black Families in Education Group, Nottingham)

They saw their work as filling a vacuum created by the shortcomings of statutory service provision and the lack of support they provided for young people and families. They all emphasised the importance of the community in providing an alternative educational site that had also helped to redress the racism they encountered within the education system.

Issues raised by the study

By focusing on a group of young people who had all turned their lives around after school exclusion and by talking to those who had been significant in their lives at this time, it was possible to highlight factors that were important in helping them to move on. Conflicts will arise between school and pupils and there have been national procedures on school exclusion in place for 18 years. However, many of these recommendations are not being implemented. It has been left to parents and relatives to strive for the continuing education of their child. Their greatest resource comes from community organisations that were not set up to deal with the aftermath of school exclusion and who struggle to find continued funding to enable them to perform this service. Given the invaluable role played by these organisations, ensuring they have central support and secure funding would be the single most effective intervention to reduce the impact of school exclusion.

The young people, their families and the agencies interviewed all described aspects of the education system and exclusion process that contributed to the particular experiences of black young people. It is therefore imperative that funding is made available for the training of everybody involved in the exclusion process to ensure greater awareness of the way race mediates the relationship between teacher and pupil. There needs to be on-going integrated support for excluded pupils to ensure successful reintegration and careers advice and guidance either at the excluding school or elsewhere in the mainstream.

How the study was carried out

Adopting a multifocal approach, the researchers looked at what the young people, their families and community organisations had to say about what worked in reducing social exclusion and enabling inclusion and what insights might be provided with respect to individual, community and family strategies.

The study looked at a sample of 33 young people (21 men, 12 women) between the ages of 15-19 who had experienced permanent school exclusion: 20 came from London and 13 from Nottingham. They were contacted through community-based projects dealing with education issues or offending or working with young black people. They had all been born in the UK and had at least one parent of African-Caribbean descent.

Data were collected through three activities:

- Up to three interviews with the young people, so as to construct their story of school exclusion and transition and to identify family members, significant others or friends who had supported them during the period of exclusion and beyond and who could be approached to take part in the study.
- Interviews with family members, carers and significant others. These focused primarily on how they supported the young person through the process of exclusion and their transition to maturity.
- Interviews with representatives of the organisations that the young people felt had been supportive. This was to find out more about the organisations and to hear their views on how they helped young people who had been excluded from school.

For further information

The full report, **School exclusion and transition into adulthood in African-Caribbean communities** by Cecile Wright, Penny Standen, Gus John, Gerry German and Tina Patel, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Black and Minority Ethnic Young People series (ISBN 1 85935 349 5, price £12.95).

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