

## The experience of 'excluded' primary school children and their families

Exclusion of children from primary school is increasing. The behaviour of these children is exceedingly difficult to manage in school and the experience of exclusion is disruptive for both the children and their families. In an intensive study of eleven cases in three local authorities, set within the national picture, Carl Parsons and a team at Canterbury Christ Church College found that:

- f** The majority of excluded children come from families facing a range of problems. Over half of those studied were receiving support from social services.
- f** The average amount of schooling lost by the children studied amounted to more than three-quarters of a school year.
- f** Assessment procedures for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties are particularly slow and relatively ineffective in leading to proposed additional or alternative provision.
- f** The average delay in setting up home tuition was 14 weeks. The average amount of home tuition provided was 3 hours a week, compared with the standard 25-hour school week.
- f** Inter-agency co-operation to support the excluded child and the family is generally poor and provision of appropriate, integrated support for the child and his or her family rare.
- f** The cost of exclusion is high, with costs to the totality of other services greater than if the resources had been directed to maintaining the child in school.
- f** The researchers conclude that greater support for both families and schools and improved inter-agency working are needed if disruption for individual children is to be minimised.

## Introduction

Exclusion of children from primary school is increasing. Estimates for all types of exclusion from all types of school vary from 25,000 to 60,000 for 1991/92. Department for Education (DfE) figures report 3,833 *permanent* exclusions for that period, of which about 570 would be from primary schools. This is certainly an under-recording.

Exclusion occurs because of what the school perceives as unacceptable, abusive or violent behaviour. It is a distressing experience for the children and their families. But it also presents a difficult problem in many cases for the Local Education Authority and other local agencies charged with a responsibility for the education and care of the child. In this study of eleven children in three local authorities, there are illustrations of long delay, poor provision, little legal protection and high cost entailed by a child's exclusion.

## The law and exclusion

The law protecting children's rights to education and to special educational provision is weak. Children with emotional or behavioural difficulties are poorly catered for and when excluded can miss the equivalent of many months of education. The 1993 Education Act, in force from September 1994, removes the category of 'indefinite' exclusions, tightens up some of the conditions for initiating exclusions and introduces Pupil Referral Units to deal with excluded pupils. Whilst these measures address some problems, the study suggests that numbers excluded from primary schools will continue to rise and that families and schools need more extensive support.

## Family background

The problem of permanent exclusions at primary school level is almost entirely associated with boys; the ratio in the LEAs studied in this investigation was over 20:1.

Most excluded primary school children are from families experiencing a range of difficulties. Five of the children in the sample had experienced the divorce or separation of their parents. Of these mothers, two had remarried. Six of the children were living in lone-parent families. Three of the children, including one who was adopted at the age of five, were living with both parents. Only one of the children had no siblings.

Six of the families were receiving support from the social services to help with their problems, whilst two more families were also experiencing difficulties.

Two families were receiving support from the social services for parenting skills.

## Assessment procedures

Schools tend to rely on disciplinary measures to cope with disruptive behaviour, rather than examining the individual problems of children and offering appropriate support. Procedures for assessing children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are slow and relatively ineffective.

The Code of Practice on Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, in force from September 1994, sets out procedures for action, recording and monitoring of intervention and for a managed escalation in attention and calls on expertise. However, this Code does not appear to offer any additional help for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties except for the provision that formal statementing procedures, once begun, should only take six months. DfE circulars on provision for pupils with problems are also unlikely to be effective without training and resources.

Primary school children exhibiting disruptive and uncontrollable behaviour are rarely, and seemingly with reluctance, accommodated within the processes for establishing a Statement of Special Educational Need. Children are put forward for assessment but in very few cases reach the stage of having a Statement drawn up. Their need is seen as behavioural, social or emotional, *not* educational. However, unless they are included in the formal statementing process, they do not have a legally protected right to additional or alternative provision of education. Consequently some are excluded and their access to education inevitably limited.

In the sample, schools had requested special educational needs assessments to be made in nine of the eleven cases. However, the assessment process, under way with six of the children, has taken an average of over three years. For two children, Statements of Special Educational Need had been drawn up by the end of the research period and in one case the statement, setting out the additional provision, had been implemented.

## Alternative educational provision

The amount of time spent out of school by the eleven children in the sample varied considerably, ranging from 17 days to 360 days. The average amount of lost schooling amounted to 145 days. This represents more than three-quarters of a school year without education (assuming 190 school days represents a complete school year). Some children

had been excluded on more than one occasion, and from more than one school. Delay in providing tuition following permanent exclusion ranged from 3 weeks to 34 weeks. The average delay was 14 weeks. Three children were not receiving any tuition and had been permanently excluded for 10, 6, and 4 weeks respectively. The maximum amount of tuition provided was 3 hours per week, compared with full-time attendance at a school which would amount to 25 hours per week. Home tuition is not able to meet the requirements of the national curriculum.

### Inter-agency co-operation

Only four cases in our sample of excluded children were restricted to the involvement of school personnel and LEA officers. Of the other seven cases, four involved the Educational Welfare Office, four involved the Educational Psychology Service, one involved the Health Department, five involved the Social Services, five involved the Home Tutor Services, two involved an Education and Behavioural Difficulties Unit, and one involved the Traveller Support Service. Three of the excluded children had been involved with the police. All this represents a substantial amount of time and effort by a range of professionals who do not necessarily know about the involvement or contribution of other agencies: one child, for example, was given the same test separately by both the Education and Health Services.

### The costs of exclusion

Exclusion is expensive. The saving to the school, where extra resources were being called upon by the child, is off-set by the increased total expenditure incurred by other sections of the Educational Department, the Social Services and Health Departments, and, sometimes, the police. The report estimates the average cost of a primary school child in England in 1991/2 as £1,412. In one case where the child was excluded for almost two years, the annual total cost to agencies was almost three times that amount. For another, excluded for less than a year, the cost amounted to over £4,500. Two of the children in the sample were first excluded before they were seven. The costs to the full range of services contributing to the alternative support and education for the child are greater for a much poorer quality of service that may persist for many years and result in enduring problems in later life.

### Conclusions

The researchers conclude that the following action is needed:

- Schools need help to manage the behaviour of the most disruptive pupils if they are to maintain these pupils in school. The support required includes training for teachers and the provision of personnel who can offer targeted, individualised support for the child.
- Intervention to support difficult children is required for families as well as for schools.
- There is an urgent need - recognised by the agencies themselves - to co-ordinate the efforts of all the various professionals involved with a single family, many of whom have problems requiring assistance and support and find their excluded child an additional problem.

### About the study

Eleven cases of exclusion from primary schools in three local educational authorities were investigated. Eighty-two interviews were conducted covering a range of agents involved with the child before and after exclusion.

Special attention in the investigation was given to:

- a) The families and the experiences of the child and family when exclusion occurred;
- b) the legal framework within which exclusion operated;
- c) the cost of exclusion.

The study has taken place at a time of heightened concerns about exclusion and before the implementation in September 1994 of measures designed to address the problem.

### Further information

A full report, *Excluding Primary School Children* is published by the Family Policy Studies Centre (price £9.50).

The report was written by Carl Parsons with Louise Benns, Jean Hailes and Keith Howlett, Christ Church College, Canterbury, Kent.

### Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

#### *Social Policy*

- 44** Lone parenthood and family disruption: the outcomes for children (Jan 94)
- 45** Children living in re-ordered families (Feb 94)

#### *Local government*

- 3** Educational change and local government (Nov 90)
- 8** Attitudes to school administration (Mar 91)
- 22** Meeting educational needs (Jan 93)

For further details on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 0904 654328 (direct line for publications queries).



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