scottish justice matters

LIVING IT

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE

Edited by Claire Lightowler, Susie Cameron and Brian Rogers

school exclusion

Karen Pryde outlines what needs to be done

'Throughout my first and second year of high school, I was constantly in trouble, being disciplined for classroom disruption, swearing, skiving, missing detentions, vandalism, fighting and disrupting the community during school time – including shoplifting - and being returned by police. Outside of school, life was just as chaotic as my parents had an up/down relationship, and I was never very sure whether they were together or not, friendships were never that real, money was tight as Dad was always in and out of work, Dad smoked hash and suffered depression and Mum and Dad would often drink in the house or if Mum went out with friends Dad would be so paranoid, it led to arguments that lasted for weeks.'

'Getting excluded wasn't a big deal for me as my Dad used to say he 'was just like me when he was my age' and he turned out alright. He also knew some of the teachers I didn't get on with and could understand why I reacted in certain ways towards them as they were like that when he attended school and clearly hadn't changed. My parents used to get annoyed with me for having to attend meetings as it was embarrassing and Mum had to get time off work, but always went. I never used to do any school work when I was excluded. I either didn't get any sent home or, just didn't do it. I got to have long lies and watch telly, but I had to clean up the kitchen. I still kept in touch with friends through text and Facebook so never felt I missed out'

(Katie, former pupil, Fife).

'If we were excluded we would sit at home, lie in our beds, play the computer, watch TV, hang about the street and cause trouble and not do school work.'

(Pupil, Focus Group, Fife).

ALTHOUGH overall school exclusion is reducing in Scotland, it remains the ultimate sanction and power held by schools to punish unacceptable behaviour. Each school makes a return to their local authority detailing incidences, reasons and number of pupils involved in exclusion, and each school is autonomous in their use of the sanction. It is this autonomy that makes it very difficult to evidence control and give clarity to 'what works?' in terms of tackling the evidenced impact of exclusion.

Impact

School exclusion creates a distance between the choice leading to the behaviour punished, the action itself and its consequences. In essence it removes the responsibility for the act and replaces it with feelings and emotions that relate to the exclusion, positive or negative, which can make return to school for a young person more difficult.

Parents also express concern at the lack, or amount, of education provided when a pupil is excluded, which impacts on opportunity to gain qualifications. Pupils feel angry and worthless and the effect on parents can lead to illness and loss of employment, whilst feeling a sense of failure that they didn't do enough to help their child's educational problems.

Impact can also include wider family stress, depression, rejection, low self esteem, breakdown, removal from home into care, difficulty finding and sustaining employment, difficulties forming and maintaining relationships, self harm, and isolation.

As McAra and McVie have found in their Edinburgh based research "school exclusion is a key moment impacting adversely on subsequent conviction trajectories" (McAra and McVie, 2010 and also on page 21 of this issue). It is reasonable to assume that the pupil, further alienated by their experience, and having spent time in unstructured and unsupervised environments, may become involved in crime and, therefore, incur more costs to the public purse.

Calculating the cost of public services is important. Comparing the costs of alternative forms of education, and adding the costs of the range of services used, provides important information to policy makers, informing debate about ways of managing exclusion, and help decisions to be made about alternatives to exclusion and the best time for agencies to intervene in a pupil's education.

Strategies and effective intervention

In the spirit of McAra and McVie's identification of an "urgent need to develop more imaginative ways of retaining challenging children within mainstream provision" (McAra and McVie, 2010), it is important to invest in every area for creative and quality solutions. There is no 'quick fix' when working with young people with challenging behaviours that would normally result in exclusion. Local authorities should take a holistic view of services contracted and staff appointed for such work, to take into account attributes and qualities not generally acknowledged in 'education specific' job descriptions. Flexibility in relation to the minimum requirements for posts which raises issues regarding pay for 'non traditional' applicants is also needed. There is a danger that staff carrying out this challenging work are penalised through lower pay because of their lack of formal qualifications.

Already there is patchy provision offering this and much more across Scotland. For example, Apex Inclusion now works in three local authorities. In 2013-14 the service received 1104 referrals and worked with 604 individual young people across its 8 locations, including partnership working with Includem and SkillsForce beginning in October 2013. In terms of a return on financial investment/reduction in public spend, referrals and numbers of young people speak for themselves relative to the cost of an Apex provision, whereby some pupils are supported for 30 periods per week for extended periods of time to keep them safe and engaged within education; equating to as little as 30p per day in some cases. However the emotional, educational and social investment far outweighs cost with young people commenting on increased confidence, self esteem, morality, decision making, positive choices, educational attainment, peer, family and professional relationships.

'If we didn't have an Inclusion Unit in our school, we would have been excluded or expelled by now – every school should have one.'

(Chloe, former pupil – Fife).

Changing the landscape of exclusion

'I didn't enjoy being excluded all the time. It was alright at first, but mud sticks and people began to expect bad things of me, including my parents, family and friends. I've had to take some things people have said and done to me on the chin, but I created that. I made those choices. I might not have been dealt the best hand in life, but that can't be my excuse for things – I'm better than that; I'm better than those who have treated me bad – I want a happy life and it's only me who can give me that.'

(Katie, former pupil – Fife).

Success isn't creating carbon copies of young people to act in the same way or engineering robotic attributes, it is about synthesising confidence, maturity, morality, responsibility and decision making to make young people feel like all round contributors and respected people with a valuable contribution to make: achieving their potential for contentment. It's about working and investing in something positive, as opposed to avoidance, guilt, sanction, aggression: not living for the next high, but living for contentment, and breeding a sense of accomplishment which helps people overcome adversity.

It is clear that exclusion is not a cure, but nor is overlooking unacceptable behaviour

It is important to note, this article does not blame schools or teachers for exclusion and exclusion is necessary in some cases and schools should retain the right to do so. These patterns reflect a much wider lack of knowledge about how we work effectively with these groups of young people and a lack of systems for solving these problems within schools. It is clear that exclusion is not a cure, but nor is overlooking unacceptable behaviour. We know how to educate young people without relying on the ineffective, harmful practice of exclusion on the pupils who often have the most to gain from staying in school.

What we need to do

1. Partner with schools and local authorities to conduct longitudinal studies on the impact of frequent out-of-school exclusions, and document promising practices to target funds for the implementation of systemic improvements in approaches to school exclusion.

2. Offer school based alternatives to exclusion to retain pupils in a familiar learning environment whereby their behaviour can be addressed and wider problems can be explored in a safe, controlled manner.

3. Encourage the use of research-based approaches, such as restorative practices to restore harm and victim empathy perspectives.

4. Appointment or use of key worker to offer consistent, trusting relationship to young person. This does not mean telling the young person what they want to hear, but offering responsible honest advice to inform responsible decision making; leading to positive choices.

5. Invest in accurate reporting and use information gathered to highlight connections between effective discipline and improved educational and personal outcomes.

Karen Pryde is school services development officer for Apex Scotland.

For more details about the work of Apex Scotland Inclusion see www.apexscotland.org.uk/apex-services/apex-inclusion/

McAra, L and McVie, S. (2010) 'Youth crime and justice: Key messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime' *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, May 2010; vol. 10, 2: pp. 179-209.

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