Exclusions: children excluded from mainstream schools

Introduction and background

The Children's Commissioner has for some time been concerned about the high number of children being excluded from mainstream schools in England, and also about the growing number of unofficial exclusions. A recent report from IPPR, *Making the Difference,* **highlighted the fact that excluded children are particularly vulnerable; they are twice as likely to be in the care of the state, 10 times more likely to suffer from recognised mental health problems and 7 times more likely to have a special educational need or disability (SEND).**

The Children's Commissioner felt that it was important to hear from the children themselves, and therefore undertook this research. There is a focus on the experiences of those with SEND, since these children are most often managed out of mainstream education.

In order to gather data, 16 interviews were conducted with children and young people across 5 different locations in England. Four of these interviews also involved speaking with a parent. The full report contains 3 case studies.

Key points

Early experiences of school

- Children were asked to reflect on their early experiences of school. For some, the primary experience stood out as having been more positive. Children had fond memories of feeling happy and secure, of fun lessons and of caring teachers.
- Some children spoke positively about the structure of the primary school day; they had appreciated the security of being in one class with one teacher for most of the day. They were also positive about the way in which teachers were responsive to their needs. One pupil explained that: 'If I was having a bad day… they'd understand, and they'd let me go out and play in the sand and in the mud until I felt better'.
- Other children had found primary school difficult as they grappled with undiagnosed special needs. One child spoke of knowing that there was something different about them and being conscious that others knew they were different. They described this as being difficult and scary.
- Children spoke about aspects of transition to secondary school which they had found challenging. These included: the increase in schoolwork and homework; having to navigate their way from one lesson to the next; and having to engage with different teachers.

Getting a diagnosis

- Challenges with diagnosis was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Although teachers had raised concerns about a child's behaviour or suggested that there may be autistic traits, these concerns had not always led to assessment by the SENCO or to provision of further support from the school.
- When referrals were made to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), parents spoke of inconsistent communications and a feeling of being passed around many different professionals. This left them feeling that no one was taking responsibility for their child.
- Delays in receiving a diagnosis were cited as a common challenge, with one parent citing a 3-and-a-half-year time delay between requesting that her son see an educational psychologist and a meeting taking place. Delays were reported as having given schools a license not to provide support.
- Linked to the challenges of obtaining a SEND diagnosis were difficulties with the assessment for and provision of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). These difficulties were more acute for children who had been excluded prior to receiving a plan, as part of the assessment involves observation of children within a classroom context.

Views of support received in school

- There was significant variation in the extent to which schools were able to respond to pupils' needs.
- The importance of one-to-one time with a teacher and of feeling listened to was a common theme throughout the interviews. Pupils spoke about needing to have at least one teacher or staff member whom they could talk to and trust. When children felt that they were not being listened to, this negatively influenced their whole perception of school and was in some cases a trigger for misbehaviour.
- In the interviews, both children and parents emphasised the need to increase one-to-one provision.
- Where schools had invested in the provision of one-to-one support, this was acknowledged as particularly helpful. Furthermore, when asked what might have prevented them from being excluded from mainstream school, some

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- children singled out one-to-one support as an intervention which would have been helpful.
- Children identified cases of teachers not knowing how to support SEND or not taking time to get too know their individual needs. Where teachers failed to do so, children felt that they were being labelled or unfairly judged.
- Many examples of schools failing to understand pupils' needs related to anger management. Some children wished that their teachers had given them more opportunities to let off steam and to leave the classroom when they needed to
- Children spoke of the types of support which they wanted to receive from their teachers. These included: flexibility to allow them to manage their behaviour; firmer guidance from teachers; and low-key support which did not involve singling them out from their peers.
- There was a narrative in the interviews that children were more likely to respect teachers who showed hem respect. Examples of respect included teachers acknowledging children's aspirations and treating them as equals. Children said that they would feel more like equals if they could also be present in meetings with parents and be part of finding solutions to any issues which came up.
- In some cases, schools failed to recognise triggers. For example, one child spoke about their teacher failing to understand that they were not comfortable with other people being in their personal space.
- Children wanted teachers to be more flexible in giving them chances to change their behaviour. One boy explained it by saying: 'They could have gave me another chance and listened to what I had to say and then learn that I couldn't take the stress of that day'.
- Children wanted more consistency around punishment and wanted to be clearer about why they were being sent to isolation.
- In some cases, families felt that schools lacked the right SEND skills, awareness or training. Criticism was made of teachers adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting children with autism and failing to understand their individual needs.
- Schools' lack of training was also apparent in examples of parents being asked to suggest suitable interventions themselves and staff being unaware of the range of issues that might be present for a child with autism.

Schools' approaches to managing behaviour

- In the interviews, it was pointed out that schools did not always follow their behaviour management policies, particularly in relation to escalating their responses.
- Isolation is commonly used as a sanction for pupils who have been disruptive. It came up as a common theme and children were negative about it. They spoke of it as engendering boredom, being held back in their learning, and being prevented from interacting with peers or friends.
- Some children mentioned issues with the administration of isolation; they reported being put into isolation without understanding why or about the speed of the process without other measures having been taken.
- Some families had experienced their child being placed on a reduced timetable; a measure which is ostensibly taken to aid reintegration into school or to prevent a formal exclusion. In other cases, parents described the impact of repeated short-term exclusions; one parent described how she had had to give up work in order to cope with the situation.

Experiences of exclusion and alternative provision

- Some children were not clear about why they had been excluded; for others it had become so normalised that it was seen as a normal part of school life.
- When respondents spoke about reasons for exclusions, 4 categories emerged, namely: a build-up of behaviour issues over time with a final trigger; exclusion following one specific incident; children being excluded to impress their peers; and exclusions which families felt were unfair.
- Children had mixed views about the benefits of fixed-term exclusions. One young person questioned how they could be supported to behave better in school when they were not there. Other children cited benefits such as having an opportunity to diffuse their feelings,
- Some of the families had experienced at least one managed move, i.e. an arrangement whereby there is a voluntary agreement for the child to move schools. Some families had felt pressured into agreeing to this, as they were told that the alternative would be a permanent exclusion which would be on the pupil's record. Others felt that they were given insufficient information.
- There was some limited discussion of families' experiences of permanent exclusion. Children highlighted a lack of information about the next steps.
- Alternative provision is: education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and education which involves pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour.
- When children spoke about their experiences of alternative provision, a number of themes emerged. Children spoke of their appreciation of the range of activities including therapy and excursions; a reduction in the pressure of the school day with regular breaks; and the more tailored support which they received. They also felt that they were better understood by staff.
- There was a sense that children were given a 'clean slate' in alternative provision, with the chance to start again each day.
- While the focus on emotional support was welcomed, there were also some concerns about a negative impact on academic attainment.

The impact of exclusions

- For some children who had struggled with school, moving elsewhere was seen as a relief. Children spoke of depression lifting and of a release from stress. However, a number of negative effects were also highlighted. Children spoke of having lost trust in adults or of having been abandoned by their school. Others spoke of how the exclusion had created anxiety and isolated them from their peers.
- Parents described the impact of exclusions on their own ability to work, for example when they had to deal with requests from school to collect children at unusual times or to have them at home for long periods of time.
- Family relationships can suffer from a child being in the wrong setting. Some families described how the child behaved badly at home when the school setting was not right.