

Educational exclusion and inclusion - Common themes from the Improving Life Chances Group

This paper has been produced by the Improving Life Chances Implementation Group on behalf of the [Youth Justice Improvement Board](#).

Darren's mother was a drug user. He said that as he was growing up his mother was not aware of what he was doing – the only times when he went regularly to school were when his gran was there. He can't remember anyone at school asking about what was going on at home. When his gran died he didn't know what to do with himself and his behaviour got worse. He was excluded from school and started to hang around with older children. He began to take drugs, get into fights and stealing and this eventually brought him to Polmont Young Offenders' Institution.

Darren's story is typical of the experience of young people in Polmont: almost 90% of young people in custody in 2013 reported that they had been excluded from school. One 17-year-old young man in Polmont said 'People like us get excluded and end up in Polmont'.

Does this have to be a self-fulfilling prophecy? Members of the Improving Life Chances Implementation Group from Includem, the Good Shepherd Centre, Barnardo's, Up-2-U's and the Scottish Prison Service shared examples of young people who were experiencing (or at risk of) exclusion from education to illustrate themes and factors which have led to children and young people being successfully included in school.

The case studies show that school exclusion is often just one of a number of factors experienced by these young people.

What other factors are frequently present in the lives of children and young people at risk of exclusion?

- Inconsistent and poor parenting; being outwith parental control; lack of a stable base; history of being Looked After; insecure patterns of attachment; parental addictions and mental health issues; lack of role models for education or employment; poor parental experiences of education and inability/fear/reluctance to engage with education professionals; sibling bullying; and young carer responsibilities;
- High risk behaviour in the community, including misuse of alcohol and drugs, offending behaviour, and periods in secure care/custody;
- Trauma; loss and bereavement (frequently multiple and traumatic bereavements); mental health concerns; self-harm and suicidal intent; low confidence and self-esteem;
- Developmental delay, diagnosis or suspicion of conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and brain injuries;
- Early disengagement from school; poor attendance; disruptive and aggressive behaviour; assaults on staff and pupils; isolation from peers; bullying and scapegoating by other children; seeking of group acceptance and relationships through risk-taking behaviour

including offending; property damage; attending under the influence of substances; absconding from school; and difficult transition from primary to secondary school.

How can school inclusion be promoted and what is the impact of this?

Increasingly, schools are working with children and young people to prevent exclusion. The case studies below describe how schools have worked with the young people, their families and partners to achieve successful outcomes which can have significant and wide ranging outcomes.

<p>Alex had attempted suicide, was extremely violent towards his younger sibling and was obsessive in his relationship with his mother. He had experienced multiple traumatic losses and was fixed on death and dying. He could not be left alone and had poor sleep.</p> <p>Alex was constantly absconding from school and was physically violent to staff. He was isolated in school and would refuse to go outside as the open space of the playground made him anxious. He was at risk of permanent exclusion from school. He was referred to Barnardo's by his Headteacher.</p>	
<p>What was done to bring about change?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family work and play therapy were undertaken • Good communication between the family, school and all professionals • Additional Support for Learning Services introduced • Positive relationship built between Alex and his class teacher • Strengths identified and focused on, with his achievements recognised. 	<p>Impact on the child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alex managed to attend a school camp • His emotional literacy improved and there were improvements in his academic work • He can now express his strengths but also what he still needs help with • He managed to move to mainstream secondary school • School exclusions have stopped • Alex cares about his future.

<p>Jake was aggressive and disruptive within the family home and the community at the time he was referred to Includem. He had had a diagnosis of ADHD and autism. Changes to medication had resulted in behavioural changes.</p> <p>In school he was aggressive and his behaviour was often violent, with Jake assaulting staff and pupils. He experienced multiple exclusions from school. He had nothing to do while out of school.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jake was given support with behaviour control and managing emotions • Practical support to ensure attendance at school such as morning telephone calls • Proactive work with parents to help them set boundaries and manage challenging behaviour • Regular communication and meetings with the school • Incidents at school were shared so 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By the end of the support period Jake was attending school and doing well • He was engaging with peers • He and his family reported that the listening, trust, and relationships with workers had made the difference.

<p>Includem could factor these into support planning and carry out focused work around specific circumstances/incidents.</p>	
<p>Julie had been in foster care since the age of three. She had significant difficulties with attachment. School staff did not understand or appreciate the level of distress Julie was experiencing daily in school. They focussed on Julie's behaviour rather than her needs and the school's focus on compliance and punitive approach led to Julie feeling more insecure and instigating fight/flight/freeze responses.</p> <p>She only attended 15 full days of school during Primary 1 and was frequently excluded. She was placed on a 'part-time timetable' with frequent exclusions. When present in school she spent most of the time with the Leadership Team and had very little peer contact.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attachment work carried out initially outwith the School to enable a move from her state of distress to 'de-stress' • Relationship with primary school, carers and young person broke down so alternative school placement identified • In the new placement, Barnardo's Workers supported Julie in school and class and gave support to staff to understand Julie's needs • Alternatives such as use of a base in school put in place to prevent exclusion • Clear plan and outcomes for inclusion created, monitored and reviewed regularly • Focus on progress and reframing negative views/comments • Different professional opinions/attitudes were challenged in multi-agency meetings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved school attendance - 100% attendance midway through the academic year and was in class 75% of the week • Meeting or exceeding academic levels • Inclusion in all school community activities • Increased self-esteem and confidence • Peer relationships had developed • Julie was more able to express feelings and emotions through discussion with adults • She was more able to take responsibility for her actions and make amends.

<p>Peter experienced inconsistent parenting. His attendance at school was poor and he was seen as disruptive in class. He attended school under the influence of substances. He disengaged from school during the early stages of his secondary education and was repeatedly excluded from school.</p> <p>He was sentenced to secure care for three years. On admission to secure care, Peter had no hope for his future.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure care provided a safe base • Positive and trusting relationships with staff developed • Small class sizes, with additional support • Strengths-based approach, focusing on areas Peter enjoyed and recognising his achievements • Education focussed on the future, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His motivation and enthusiasm for learning grew • He identified that adults having faith in him and not judging him made him feel valued • He was proud of his achievements • On leaving he was hopeful of achieving a college placement, something he would never had considered previously.

including leadership awards and barbering qualification.	
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<p>At home Paul was defiant and bullied his younger brothers, while being very dependent on his mother. With the move to Secondary School he would get upset, walk out and damage furniture. Mum was concerned about his learning needs but he had not been assessed by the school for these needs and was not receiving additional support.</p> <p>He was being excluded fortnightly.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mum was supported by the Up-2-Us worker to write to the school detailing her concerns and Paul's rights • Paul was assessed by the educational psychologist in second year and diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia • He was assessed as functioning at the stage of an 8- , not 12-year-old, and had very low levels of literacy. The advice was that his behaviour in school was to hide this. • Through advocacy support to Paul and his mother, an alternative school placement was identified • In this placement Paul received a curriculum tailored to his needs, interests and strengths, and specialist equipment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul now loves attending school and particularly talks about a pen he can use which shows him how to write and speak the letters • His progress in education has improved • He is more confident and has greater social and communication ability.

What made the successes possible?

Each case is different but some common factors contributed to successes:

- **Building a relationship with the child or young person:** getting to know them and their individual circumstances and responses to situations, recognising that this takes time and that there will be changes with age and stage of development;
- **All practitioners adopting a holistic approach when working with the child and family,** one which takes account of all the factors affecting the child and recognises the central importance of relationships: a child-centred, trauma-informed, rights-based approach, founded on an understanding of brain development and attachment theory.
- **Focusing on developing solutions and resilience,** building on strengths and being prepared to pre-empt and address potential difficulties;
- **Looking beyond the child's behaviour to their needs, seeking to understand the distress often experienced by our children on a daily basis,** and supporting reflection on how a focus on compliance and punitive approaches can be perceived by children and impact on their behaviours;
- **Taking a whole-family approach,** with all those involved feeling valued and receiving appropriate individual, as well as joint, support. The support can be as broad as the issues being experienced by the family, such as combinations of: individual and group parenting

support; information-giving; practical and emotional support; crisis support; and helping families to feel able to ask for help without judgement;

- **Recognising the crucial role of education staff and utilising all available services that education can provide**, while identifying where external support, community-based services and support outwith school may be necessary;
- **Recognising that the transition between primary and secondary school can be a particularly challenging time for vulnerable young people** and that good planning and additional support can be crucial for the transition and beyond;
- **Recognising that some children and young people find it very difficult to engage with traditional school provision and ways of working, and so providing a flexible and supportive learning environment within which options are tailored to the individual young person and their needs.** For these young people, key questions are: What are this young person's needs and interests? How can we help to ensure they are able to participate in and benefit from the full range of opportunities school provides, in the classroom and beyond? How can we make school work for them, and what could others do to support this?
- **Empowering children and young people and enabling them to develop agency:** showing rather than telling; role modelling rather than 'doing for'; with children and young people as active participants, while also providing advocacy for child and family when required;
- **Clear planning**, appropriately sequenced and paced and regularly reviewed, especially at times of transitions;
- **Supporting teaching staff** to understand the needs of young people they are working with, provide emotional support and be the type of teacher young people tell us is important to them. In addition, increasing understanding of the additional negative long-term impacts of exclusion on children who have already experienced severe difficulties;
- **Willingness to identify challenges and possible barriers to success through the multidisciplinary approach**, and a collective commitment to make any necessary changes to address these, with mutual respect by leaders from relevant sectors;
- **Perseverance in the face of setbacks** and recognition by all those involved that addressing multi-faceted and long-standing difficulties takes time and that progress/achievements needs to be recognised, marked, and applauded by workers step by step.

What outcomes were achieved?

Across case studies, there were benefits which included: increased attendance and hope of continuing into further education; improved educational attainment; pride in achievements; greater social and communication skills; improved relationships with peers and education staff; participation in school community activities, including out of school activities; and attitudinal change by the young person, their parents and education staff.

There was also evidence of wider benefits, including: improved behaviour; reduced substance use; increased self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation to change and hope for the future; enhanced ability to deal with changes and ask for help; a fuller life; improved family relationships; growing social networks; increased emotional literacy and wellbeing; improved parental confidence and ability to manage behaviours; improved mental health; and identification of, and accessing support for, learning/health difficulties.

However, we know we are still not getting it right for all our young people and that the impact can be significant. From our work in HMYOI Polmont, young men and women talking about their experience of exclusion commonly refer to:

- The impact of moving from primary school, where ‘someone really knew me’ to secondary school, where it was difficult to form relationships with a large number of new adults whose expectations and styles of interacting were often very different;
- The powerful effect of peers, especially the influence of older young people while excluded, and the sometimes rapid escalation of substance abuse, violence and offending;
- Broken connections with school but also with out-of school activities and the role models and pro-social pastimes such as football which that wider community can provide.

More than 70% of young people in Polmont say that they enjoyed school some or all of the time, but many had not engaged fully in schooling from very early in their secondary school career, whether through truanting or exclusion. After exclusion, very few of the young men and women report having made a successful return to their mainstream secondary school. When things had been going better for them in school, they mention that they had been learning about things that they found interesting (including projects), the value of praise and ‘treats’ such as outings, and above all relationships: ‘a teacher who knew me’: ‘some teachers were brand new – they understood me, didnae shout at me’.

What can we learn from their experiences so that more of them can continue to be included in school?

‘I wish I’d stayed at school’ (Jamie, Polmont)

‘I couldn’t read out in class so kept kicking off and leaving books at home’ (Lisa, Polmont)

‘There was a lot more going on but they didnae ask. Teachers should look out for children who are frustrated and angry and find the reason’ (Annie, Polmont)

‘Schools need to do more. If I didnae go to secure, I’d have no qualifications. I wouldn’t know anything’ (Robert, Polmont)

‘Just talk to me – don’t just see me as bad’ (Sharon, Polmont)

For further information about the issues raised in this paper please contact colleagues at the Centre for Youth & Criminal Justice at cycj@strath.ac.uk

December, 2016