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Targeting exclusion, disaffection and truancy in secondary schools

An evaluation of an alternative curriculum for older pupils

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ABSTRACT

This article begins with a cursory discussion on rates and causes of school exclusion as well as curriculum initiatives intended to minimise exclusion risks and improve school attendance. Focus is then placed upon an evaluation of an innovative programme designed to provide support to those at risk of exclusion from secondary schools. Consideration is given to recent government thinking and initiatives intended to help schools to reduce rates of disaffection, truancy and exclusion. The implications of these initiatives for those who have –and others at risk of developing – an identified special educational need are also considered.

KEYWORDS

disaffection; social exclusion; special needs; truancy; vocational training

Introduction

Towards social inclusion

Recent government preoccupations with social inclusion in the wider society have spurred renewed attention towards the issue of exclusion from school. Although an enduring issue, concerns were heightened in the 1990s by a rapid escalation in exclusion rates, along with the knowledge that:

- only 15% of those permanently excluded return to mainstream schools (DfE, 1995);
- many excludees go on to commit criminal acts (Cullingford, 1999);
- a high proportion of the UK prison population have experienced school exclusion (Vulliamy and Webb, 2001);
- most school-aged offenders sentenced in court have experience of exclusion or truancy (see Vulliamy and Webb, 2000);
- 65% of daytime crime in some inner-city areas is undertaken by excludees, truants and absentees (Social Exclusion Report, 1998);
- exclusion and educational underachievement are often inextricably linked; and
- youngsters with special educational needs are four times more likely to be excluded than their peers (DfES, 2003; see also Watling, 2004).

Additionally, the literature is awash with findings that the consequences of the general disobedience and physical aggression directed by many of those at risk of exclusion towards pupils and staff (Donovan, 1998) can impact adversely upon the whole school. Unacceptable behaviour serves as an unwelcome model for peers, teachers' management skills can be challenged to the extent that generates stress, and pupils' classroom learning can be disrupted. A supplementary quandary is that disaffection in school can alienate pupils from learning at school and elsewhere. In extreme instances, this alienation may be life-long (Charlton, 1992). Thus, the amelioration of school-based causes of exclusion can benefit society at large, pupils at risk of exclusion as well as teachers and other pupils. In turn, this resolution may go some way to eradicating the adverse school characteristics that help precipitate some special educational needs, as well as reduce exclusion risks among those already identified as having a special education need.

Consequently, the exclusion literature has burgeoned in two directions. First, the literature has attended to rates and causes of school exclusion. Secondly, there has been a focus upon initiatives designed to reduce school disaffection and exclusions such as curriculum modifications, home-school links, school ethos enhancement, and improved classroom pedagogy (see Reid, 2002).

Rates of exclusion

Permanent exclusions rose from just below 3000 in 1990/1 to nearly 13,000 in 1996/7 (DfEE, 1998). DfEE (1997) reported around 83% of those excluded in 1995/6 came from secondary schools, and most were in the 13 to 15 age range. Moreover, the large majority (80% plus) of permanent exclusions were boys. Whilst white and Asian pupils were under-represented, Afro-Caribbean and mixed-race pupils were overrepresented (Wright et al., 2000). Although the official exclusion figure decreased to 10,404 in 1997/8 this did little to assuage anxieties about the most common reason for exclusion, namely disobedience and physical assaults against staff and/or pupils (Hallam and Castle, 2001).

Disquiet about exclusion levels was exacerbated by allegations that official data were unreliable and invalid. Specifically, it was suggested that official exclusion returns underestimated the magnitude of the problem (see Vulliamy and Webb, 2003) for reasons including:

- the avoidance of exclusion by providing work experience, further education enrolments and dual registration at a pupil referral unit;
- the transfer of 'problem' pupils to undersubscribed schools without resorting to formal exclusion procedures;
- using 'cooling-off' days and unofficial exclusions; and
- the voluntary removal of pupils from independent schools without recourse to exclusion procedures.

Causes of exclusion

Causes of exclusion can involve one or more from a range of social, emotional and educational factors. More specifically, factors can include: inadequate home backgrounds, pupil mental health problems, pressures on schools to raise their academic and attendance profiles as well as to retain children evidencing special educational needs (SENs), and school-related weaknesses which overlook, create or exacerbate pupils' personal, academic and social needs (e.g. Blyth and Milner, 1993; Lee et al., 1995; Hayden et al., 1996; Munn et al., 2000; McDonald and Thomas, 2003). In more recent times, the blame for high levels of exclusion has been laid, on occasions, upon:

strategies to promote the government's Standards agenda, such as publishing school league tables based on National Curriculum assessment and Ofsted inspections, [which] are undermining the inclusion agenda. (Vulliamy and Webb, 2003, pp. 45–6)

Not dissimilarly, Morris (1996) argued that many pupils are excluded because the National Curriculum (content as well as delivery) depresses their interest and demotivates them. Predicaments such as these can readily induce disaffection with – and, at times, precipitate exclusion from – school. In support of such comment, Morris cites views from those with exclusion experience who 'would like change with regard to the type of work they are expected to do, and attitudes and responses of certain teachers' (p. 37). Thoughts of this kind are alluded to in the DfES (2003) paper where reference is made to pupils being 'turned off by their experience of secondary education' (p. 10). Whilst positive changes in attitudes and responses can usually be affected within school, exacting and (for the most part) inflexible National Curriculum requirements have stifled radical curriculum innovation in recent times.

Reducing exclusion

Hallam and Castle evaluated school pilot projects designed to reduce exclusion rates. They concluded that the most effective projects were those that:

were implemented with the full commitment of school management; involved the whole school; included parents; and placed responsibility on pupils for managing their own behaviour. (2001, p. 178)

Intervention that aims to promote positive changes in the ways in which homes and schools relate both to each other and to the pupils involved is intuitively appealing. An initiative of this kind was the Home Office funded project Meeting Need and Challenging Crime in Partnership with School that placed trained home–school support workers in seven comprehensive schools (see Vulliamy and Webb, 2003). Exclusion rate reductions of 25% were reported.

It is only recently that schools have been able to become more imaginative in attempts to improve provisions for older pupils' needs in order to reduce exclusion risks. Arrangements of this kind have been galvanized by recent DfES initiatives to speed up social inclusion practices by providing for a relaxation of National Curriculum requirements at Key Stage 4 (KS4). In addition, the DfES (2003) has revealed plans to widen this relaxation, enabling schools to devise a curriculum better tailored to meet individual needs. Consequently, schools have become more empowered to help with the 're-engaging and re-motivating of "at risk" or disaffected young people and bringing them back into mainstream provision [to improve] their achievement at KS4 in Years 10 and 11' (Raffo, 2003, p. 70). Initiatives of this kind in school and elsewhere have involved a variety of programmes including work-related programmes (e.g. Manchester's Mpower programme, Connexions Service, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Sure Start). One of these initiatives, the Alternative Curriculum (AC2001), is the subject of this article.

An evaluation of the alternative curriculum 2001

Background

European Social Fund (ESF) monies were made available to Gloucestershire Connexions Service to enable them to become the lead partner in a regional project intended to reduce the number of exclusions at KS4 by:

- offering young people at risk of disaffection an alternative curriculum experience in school and/or elsewhere;
- increasing the number of vocational and other qualifications of 'at risk' young people; and
- reducing levels of non-attendance

The Connexions Service is a recent national initiative supported with funding from the DfES. The service was instituted in the spring of 2001 with the intention of helping to maximize pupils' learning potential and to help with their successful transition into adulthood, further education, higher education and/or the workplace. The service integrates a number of personnel who work with 13- to 19-year-olds including:

schools, colleges, careers services, the youth service, education welfare or education social work, health agencies, youth offending teams and where appropriate, social services.
(Reid, 2002, p. 156)

Aims

The broad aim of AC2001 was to provide an alternative curriculum to pupils who had been, or were at risk of being, excluded under either fixed-term or permanent arrangements. So, the AC2001 was designed to promote social inclusion through improving school attendance, by reducing exclusion risks, and by enhancing educational and vocational qualifications in order to help optimize pupils' future employment prospects. In addition to providing scope to enhance pupils' personal, social and educational/vocational development, the programme usually offered opportunities for work placements and related vocational (and other) studies at colleges and elsewhere.

Participating schools (n= 9) used their European Social Fund allocation in various ways: for example, to buy in additional staff to administer GNVQ, NVQ and ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) courses. Other schools employed additional learning support workers to operate alongside other staff or to monitor work-based employment experiences. Some schools made use of the monies to fund external study placements at further education centres.

Evaluation

An evaluation methodology was adopted involving in-depth qualitative fieldwork using interviews and field notes. Interviews were undertaken with samples of AC2001 pupils and providers (i.e. staff). The gathering of this data allowed the data analysis to make use of triangulation to cross-check data sources, and to elicit any differential perceptions of the same event.

Participants

The principal focus in the evaluation study was upon young people from Year 11 who were enrolled in the second year of the AC2001 in the nine secondary schools (the second part of the study – considered later – focuses upon adults' perceptions). Thirteen pupils (five males; eight females) were identified through random sampling from the register of those pupils undertaking the AC2001; with the non-random addition of a further two young people (one male; one female) to guarantee the involvement of one pupil excluded from school, and another who had 'dropped out' of the AC2001 programme. The above sampling arrangements resulted in only eight of the nine 'partner' schools being involved in the evaluation.

For the second part of the study, four of the eight participating partner schools were selected because of the differential nature of their usage of the ESF monies awarded to them.

School 1 ASDAN

School 2 GNVQ (at school)

School 3 GNVQ (at school and at workplace)

School 4 GNVQ + NVQ (at college), work placements, and ASDAN (at school)

Thus, from these four schools, adults (n= 15) become the supplementary unit of study. Participants included:

- four AC2001 curriculum coordinators (the key personnel in administering the programme);
- four learning support workers;
- three personal advisors; and
- four work-placement employers.

AC curriculum coordinators were responsible for the organization, monitoring and related administration of the course. Learning support workers provided basic skills support to those with needs in this area, although some were involved with other AC 2001 duties generally linked to the workplace attachments (e.g. checking attendance, arranging transport). Personal advisers played a central role in providing support to pupils who were encountering difficulties on account of their 'academic under-achievement, health, ethnicity, and social, cultural or home life' (Reid, 2002, p. 157). Whilst some PAs were appointed and managed by the schools' head teachers, they still operated as part of the integrated Connexions Service. Employers provided workplace attachment experiences for pupils, usually linking up with the AC coordinators or another designated member of school staff.

In summary, pupils (n= 15) and adults (n= 15) were consulted in order to elicit their general perceptions of areas of strength and weakness associated with the AC2001, as well as the extent to which the AC2001 pro-programme was meeting the programme's aims. These consultations involved face-to-face, semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and then analysed using the QSR Nvivo software program, with field notes added.

Results

Pupils' perceptions of the AC2001

Perceptions of the AC2001 programme were generally positive. For example, pupils referred to: the programme's motivating attributes (especially the work placements); study demands which were manageable; a relaxed classroom and workplace ethos; support in basic skills, personal and social education areas as well as careers guidance. Whilst some pupils perceived GNVQ courses – compared to GCSE courses – to be less demanding, most appreciated the value of the more practical elements associated with the AC2001. Pupils also referred to the 'feel good' factor emanating from satisfying programme experiences (albeit, these experiences were more apparent in some curriculum areas, and at some venues, than others). These 'feel good' factors included positive teacher (verbal) feedback, adults who listened, helpful written comments on assignment and project work, and assignment work that was marked and returned regularly.

More specific positive comments made reference to:

- information technology (IT), with most pupils suggesting that further education colleges, rather than schools, tended to provide better opportunities for successful IT learning;
- college and workplace environments where pupils had opportunities to be treated as adults, as well as socialize with older pupils and employees; experiences which could boost social confidence in the workplace, school/college as well as the outside world;
- workplace glimpses of the 'post-school' world, which could help improve pupils' confidence in coping with post-school life, combined with vocational training elements which gave added meaning to compulsory schooling; and to
- pupils having the opportunity to exercise some control over their lives when (with guidance from homes at times, but more usually from teachers) they made decisions about whether to join the AC2001 course. Some pupils admitted that the opportunity to make this choice subsequently encouraged school attendance, and some commented that they looked forward to the beginning of the school week, particularly where curriculum experiences were shared between school and elsewhere (e.g. college or workplace).

As expected, not all pupils' comments were approving. By way of illustration, pupils talked of wanting more choice of subject areas, of removing some of the repetition from the timetable, of making some classroom-based subjects more interesting and more focused, of having more choice about which college they attended, and of college staff becoming more able to deal with the behaviour problems presented by some of the pupils. Disruptive pupils disrupted lessons and, consequently, they disrupted other pupils' learning.

AC2001 coordinators' comments

Coordinators, too, were positive about the diverse ways in which the AC2001 programme was catering for the pupils' wide range of personal, social and academic/vocational needs. Moreover, coordinators were in unison in claiming that the AC2001 had enabled schools to retain pupils who otherwise might be excluded. This belief emanated from their judgement that the large majority of pupils:

- had benefited from, as well as enjoyed the course;
- had been motivated to attend and to work on the course;
- had improved their behaviour;
- were able to cope satisfactorily with study demands;
- had found that the course experiences – particularly the vocational and workplace elements – helped them link up with post-school life; and had
- found the course more career-orientated.

The AC2001 programme differed substantially from the standardized main-stream provision schools offered. Consequently, concerns were sometimes raised about the possibility of stigmatizing labels being attached to the programme. One school's coordinator had conducted her own inquiry on this subject and had reported, reassuringly, that 'non AC2001' peers rarely attached a stigma to those undertaking the programme.

Learning support workers' (LSWs) comments

There was a consensus among the LSWs interviewed, that the alternative curriculum's study programmes matched the broad educational needs of the pupils, especially those at risk of exclusion or with a record of un-authorized absences. More specifically, the programmes were perceived to:

- offer pupils individual support in basic skills areas;
- provide the personal, social and academic guidance that helped motivate pupils;
- enhance pupils' self-worth;
- enable some pupils (perhaps, those with a record of misbehaviour or poor attendance) to have a 'clean start'; and to
- improve most pupils' behaviour and attendance.

Other remarks supported employers' (see later) and pupils' thoughts that workplace experiences could encourage pupils:

- to behave as adults;
- to exercise control over their own behaviour; and
- to build and sustain relationships with adults.

Understandably, these learning experiences were perceived as improving many pupils' chances of securing full-time employment when they left school. By way of illustration, one girl's work experience had enabled her to demonstrate to her (future) employer that she could successfully under-take the work. Others, whilst not finding employment in this way, were likely to benefit from the references they would receive from favourable work experiences. The LSWs' only captious comment transpired when they acknowledged that their support practices would have benefited from additional in-service training.

Personal advisers (PAs) comments

PAs were often able to provide positive feedback on the AC2001 course. For instance, they noted that many of the pupils became more independent towards the completion of their two-year course. Most pupils had opportunities to experiment with workplace placement until they found the placement that suited them. Opportunities of this kind became less practicable once they left school. Even those who were unsuccessful in finding a placement that suited them had benefited in the sense that they knew what they didn't want to do. One difficulty raised by the PAs (especially those not based within the school) was that it was often difficult – particularly in large schools – to link up regularly and effectively with teachers when problems or issues arose during their meetings with AC2001 pupils.

Employers' perceptions

Whilst employers sometimes admitted to being less than well informed about the AC2001 workplace requirements (especially in terms of their workplace responsibilities), they tended to confirm many of the views expressed by the pupils, and staff, about workplace experiences. Positive feedback confirmed that many of the pupils were not only enjoying their work experiences

but also that they were usually engaged in meaningful tasks of interest to them. Thus, the artificial divide between school and work had been breached, at least in part. Typical of such remarks is the employer who declared that one youngster was performing extremely well as (what she termed) a secretarial assistant. The youngster referred to was one who was now on her third work placement, and performing well despite earlier problems in socializing with men in the workplace. Another employer was clear in her mind that she had a responsibility to help train up 'her' youngster in as many different skills areas as was practicable, so that she would be able to cope well if she went on to secure work in that area.

A number of employers commented favourably on a range of 'their' pupils' qualities including time-keeping, assuming responsibilities, and socializing well with colleagues. One employer highlighted the effective-ness of praise in drawing attention to good works undertaken by those on work placements. At times, employers' competence in working with the pupils owed as much to their personal as well as their professional experiences. By way of illustration, one employer used her own family's experiences to help understand the attitudes and behaviour (including fears) of those on work placements, even when they failed to turn up for work.

These experiences allowed pupils to begin their adjustment to the unfamiliar world of work; one (hopefully) they will be entering upon leaving school. These adjustments could give them more confidence, greater maturity and help to improve their interpersonal skills.

The only matter of concern raised by employers referred to those occasions when schools omitted to maintain regular contact with them (apart from checking up that pupils had arrived for work). Where this contact was lacking, employers could be left wondering about whether or not they were undertaking work in line with the alternative curriculum.

Discussion

The limitations of the methodology used in this study should be taken note of when interpreting the study's findings. First, the evaluation involved a small (yet random) sample of pupils undertaking, and staff and employers providing, the alternative curriculum. Secondly, the qualitative nature of the data collected meant that the evaluation focused exclusively upon perceptions. Perceptions may reflect neither an individual's 'honest' thoughts nor the reality of the experiences (s)he is asked to reflect upon. Quantitative data on exclusion rates were not included for reasons outlined at the beginning of this article (see Vulliamy and Webb, 2003, for example) as well as to avoid possible confounding influences from reactivity and/or demand characteristics (e.g. Hawthorne effects).

What became evident during the evaluation exercise was that pro-programme providers had invested much of their time and professional expertise into the course organization and delivery. However, at least some of the LSWs felt their programme contributions would have benefited from further in-service training relevant to the task of supporting pupils, many of whom presented learning and behaviour problems of a kind, which regularly challenge mainstream class teachers. Additionally, coordinators were required to deal with administrative responsibilities which were not always easy to cope with, given their other teaching, advisory, pastoral and supervisory duties.

For the most part, pupils were positive about their AC2001 experiences. More generally, their comments suggested that these experiences had helped bring about improvements in their school behaviour and attendance. So, for most of the pupils the alternative curriculum seemed to have assisted them to re-engage – or remain engaged – with education. Accordingly, pupils tended to become motivated towards, and then remain interested in, a curriculum typically perceived by them as being of more interest, relevance and career-orientation than the one commonly on offer

in schools. In particular, pupils frequently made favourable comments on: the availability of staff support in personal, social and basic skills matters; a positive programme ethos and agreeable curriculum experiences especially those that were based in the workplace or at further education colleges. Most pupils appeared to regard the work placements as a core component in their preparation for post-school life. Interestingly, a recent report by HMI – in their inspection of Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) courses in schools and colleges – drew attention to the paucity of ‘work experience and opportunities for students to have direct contact with employers’ (Ofsted, 2004, p. 9).

Staff and pupils’ perceptions of the AC2001 outcomes were impressive. They included increases in self-worth, improvements in attendance and behaviour, changes for the better in personal/social skills’ and improved peer relations, as well as added insights into post-school work. By and large, pupils and staff perceived the AC2001 as being tailored better to meet pupils’ needs than the more traditional ‘Procrustean bed’ upon which pupils routinely have been thrown.

Vocational and educational training (VET) on a broader front

In recent years, the meagre provision for vocational education in schools has triggered widespread concern; one shared especially by employers (see Campbell and Giles, 2003; Salmon, 2003). This concern seems under-pinned by flawed notions that vocational subjects are of lesser import than academic ones. Thus, for the last half-century efforts have been made repeatedly to:

enhance the status of vocational education and training (VET) and create parity of esteem for vocational as against academic learning and qualifications. (Hyland, 2002, p. 287)

Comment of this kind was foreshadowed by DfEE (2000) where an admission was made of the failure ‘to value technical study and attainment’ (para.26). Much earlier, Lewis (1991) had been critical of the widespread opinion that the vocational was subordinate to the academic. Encouragingly, perhaps, DfES (2003) acknowledges the need to design a more appropriate curriculum and a qualifications framework for the 14 to 19 age range in order to prepare pupils for life and work in the twenty-first century. It recognizes, too, that whilst the existing system ‘does not currently offer those opportunities effectively to those who wish to follow vocational learning programmes’ (DfES, 2003, p. 9) it is vital that adequate provision is made to facilitate ‘a much stronger vocational offer’ (p. 7).

For myriad reasons – including personal, social, educational and economic ones – vocational education in school needs to achieve parity with the traditional academic curriculum. Similarly, a concomitant of this parity must be the availability of a range of vocational courses sufficient to satisfy popular and reasonable choice. (Although the range of vocational offerings may ultimately be determined elsewhere, in the interim period it could make good sense for schools to allow choices to be linked to local and national employment needs.) Vocational courses – as is the case with academic courses – can be designed to cater for all abilities. On the one hand, they can respond to interests and career aspirations of those attracted to the vocational domain: on the other hand, they may ‘switch on’ those who risk being ‘switched off’ by an academic focus.

Nonetheless, boosting the vocational input into the curriculum for older pupils will not be achieved without difficulties. Whilst the DfES(2003) paper, ‘14–19: Opportunity and Excellence’, provides some grounds for optimism, VET initiatives in the UK have a less than impressive track record. Lewis, for example, talks of the ‘historical problem of vocational education’ (1991, p. 96), whilst Hyland alludes to the ‘perennial problems’ (2002, p. 288) of vocational and educational training. Elsewhere, Hillman is disparaging of ‘an array of short-term and narrowly focused initiatives’

(1997, p. 29) devised to resolve the problem. Moreover, little optimism can be found in the Ofsted (2004) report where in the schools and colleges visited by Her Majesty's Inspectors, the AVCE courses examined tended to be neither well designed nor seriously vocational. Hopefully, the extant focus upon this much-neglected area of education will spawn greater success than earlier efforts.

Conclusion

The relaxation of National Curriculum requirements in Years 10 and 11 has given schools freedom to innovate with the curriculum for older pupils. What is more, the thinking within the DfES (2003) paper holds promise of further change whereby schools will become empowered to make the curriculum more appealing to many older pupils. Even so, it seems that external forces will become increasingly influential in shaping the school curriculum. For example, by October 2004 there were 20 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) up and running with five in development expected to be fully licensed by summer 2005. These SSCs will represent the voice of differential business sectors (e.g. e-skills UK, Skills for Logistics, Construction Skills). They will have authority to make recommendations to government about ways in which resources are allocated to the education sector (e.g. to schools, colleges and further education). Therefore, those who employ school leavers will have a voice in the making of decisions about how their future employees are educated. In her recent address to the National Skills Convention, Salmon made the salient comment that 'fundamentally, we're shifting the balance of power between those that supply training, and those that demand it' (2003, p.1). The need for this shift is pressing given that the country's poor productivity levels are due largely to deficiencies in the country's vocational and educational training. For instance, the UK faces significant weaknesses in basic and intermediate craft and technical skills (see Campbell and Giles, 2003). Clearly, current thinking has to address the need to develop more meaningful and profitable links between school and the workplace.

In due course, the developments and proposals mentioned earlier may help bring about a radically revised school curriculum for many older pupils (with and without an identified special educational need), one which caters for all pupils including those hitherto demotivated by the traditional mainstream curriculum and exposed to disaffection and/or exclusion risks. (Innovation of this kind is vital if teachers are to cope successfully with the extra pupils expected to stay on at school following the government's planned introduction of a means-tested Educational Maintenance Allowance in September 2004.) Thus, the relaxation of National Curriculum requirements at KS4, parity between the vocational and academic, more work-related/work-based experiences for those who seek it, and opportunities for the employment sector to have a greater say in what is taught can provide some support to government thrusts to promote social inclusion; in school at least.

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