

## When exclusion blurs

How to deal with troublesome children is the greatest challenge facing the comprehensive ideal, yet efforts are being undermined by ambivalent attitudes at all levels. So concludes research funded by the Executive on alternatives to exclusion. The research paints an encouraging picture of gradual progress since the phasing out of the belt, praising the growing use of positive responses to encourage good behaviour and the more open discussion about how teacher behaviour influences pupil behaviour. It highlights useful developments such as joint assessment teams, behaviour support and social skills groups. But it also identifies the factors limiting progress and throws out major challenges to schools, authorities and the Executive.

The research puts a lot of store on school ethos. Personally I see ethos here as a polite way of referring to the attitudes of the powerful players rather than some collective shared reality. It came as little surprise that major differences in management attitudes distinguished more and less inclusive schools. Inclusive management saw the school's responsibility as developing the social and academic achievement of all pupils while less inclusive schools narrowed their remit to the academic progress of conforming pupils. Consequently low excluding schools had a more flexible curriculum, more staff support, involved in-house and outside support in joint problem solving, including decisions on exclusions and built non judgmental relations with parents. High excluding schools stuck to the academic curriculum, preferred extraction and wanted external agencies to 'fix' problem pupils or place them elsewhere, had hierarchical decision making procedures re exclusions and expected unquestioning parental support.

We have moved far since John Major said "We need to condemn a little more and understand a little less." But I can recognise the ambivalence towards difficult children that the research found throughout education, reflected in a lack of funding, systematic analysis and evaluation, strategic thinking, practice exchange and staff development.

Examples of this attitude are outlined. The most common alternative to formal exclusion was internal exclusion and informal exclusion although banned was widespread. Is this the price of school autonomy? The researchers point out that while internal and informal exclusion will be used in the child's interests they may prevent the seriousness being signalled to parents and authorities. A reduction in formal exclusions will meet targets but will it hide poor provision through more informal and internal exclusions? The most

common ground for exclusion was fighting outside the classroom. Why aren't schools using conflict mediation or preventive playground projects to deal with something that doesn't challenge authority or classroom order? Also there have been no systematic attempts to address the prominence of excluded boys. 20 years on from the Pack Report, we are still unsure if school units are a sanction or a support. The research found that units can provide a breathing space for teachers and co-ordinate help for troubled pupils but they de-skill teachers, isolate the problem pupils and result in less support for most pupils. While there is a clamour for off-site provision, the research was critical of alternative provision's unclear aims, restricted curriculum, poor peer relationships, low attainments and the subjective and inconsistent way children are selected

Exclusion they conclude is a blunt instrument at best providing respite but better outcomes could be achieved with more intensive analysis and support. Exclusion they argue sends messages that a sense of community is based on conformity rather than on understanding difference and it may insulate pupils from any sense of responsibility for the excluded and teach that difference is best handled via rejection. As behaviour is partly a function of the school, they reckon the majority's right to an ordered education could be better achieved by focusing on school improvement rather than rejecting one or two children. High excluding schools will recognise themselves but will they see any need to change?

What is the answer to this ambivalence? I think it's caused by a lack of clarity about goals and uncertainty about methods. Perhaps a national strategic framework would give a clear direction for behaviour management with the aim of improving schools for all children. Without such a framework practice will continue to be well intentioned but uncertain and piecemeal. The Executive is planning to create such a framework to tackle persistent youth offending which will include outcome measures and accreditation of programmes. Education needs to learn from Social Work research into offenders programmes that has produced "What works" principles making such a framework possible. The debate should not be between hard discipline and soft treatment but about what works. As they deal with an overlapping group, the Exclusion and Youth Crime strategies could merge under the community schools programme. Such a joint framework would meet McCrone's recommendation for an appraisal of policies and resources to tackle in discipline and help schools clarify the tensions and dilemmas facing them.

