

SCHOOL EXCLUSION & TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD IN AFRICAN-CARIBBEAN COMMUNITIES

CECILE WRIGHT, PENNY STANDEN,
GUS JOHN, GERRY GERMAN
& TINA PATEL, 2005

CONTEXT Concern has been expressed over a number of years about the disproportionate numbers of African Caribbean children who are excluded from schools.

Official figures suggest that African Caribbean boys are between four and 15 times more likely to be excluded than white boys while African Caribbean girls are four times more likely to be excluded than white girls. The figure could be even more because these official statistics do not take into account unofficial and unrecorded exclusions.

Sociologists and politicians are also aware that educational success is

one of the most effective routes for people to become integrated into society. There is a concern that children excluded from school become those who are socially excluded from work and society as adults. This study is concerned with exploring the experiences of excluded young people and of the agencies that deal with them. The intention of the study is to support organisations that are attempting to reduce school exclusions.

FIND OUT MORE

Wright, C., Standen, P., John, G., German, G. and Patel, T. (2005) *School Exclusion and Transition into Adulthood in African-Caribbean Communities*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The full report can be accessed at www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/1859353509.pdf

A summary is available at www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0435.asp

METHODS

The study focuses on the excluded young people, their carers and families. It also studies relevant organisations with the intention of gaining an insight into what they have to say about positive strategies to support excluded young people.

Excluded young people are generally very difficult to study, because they are not easy to locate and often unwilling to participate in research.

Research was carried out in two cities with higher than average numbers of black people: Nottingham and London. African Caribbean students in these areas are particularly likely to be excluded from school and to be unemployed as adults.

The sample consisted of 33 young people, 21 males and 12 females. 20 were from London and 13 from Nottingham. They were contacted by official agencies dealing with exclusions. All were born in Britain, aged between 14 and 19 and had experienced school exclusion. In addition, at least one parent was of African Caribbean descent.

There were four data collection processes: an initial interview, a friendship group interview, a final interview ten months after the first and interviews with family members and carers. Not all of the young people were interviewed three times. All interviews were recorded.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This study offers important evidence about the differential educational achievement of minority ethnic groups. It has particular points to make about relationships and processes within school and about teacher/pupil relationships. In addition there are valuable insights into the experience of education for students from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, there are particular issues with regard to values and the approach to the research. We learn much qualitative information about the impact of exclusion on ethnic minorities but there are issues concerning the subjectivity of such accounts when we do not have access to the perspective of the excluding schools.

KEY FINDINGS

Many of the excluded students felt that the school had been unjust in excluding them. They did not agree with the views of their school as to the underlying reason for their exclusion.

Schools said that the pupils had shown challenging behaviour but the students claimed that the schools had been unsupportive of students with difficulties and were excluding pupils who would not achieve good examination grades. They felt labelled and discriminated against and had found it difficult to return to school because they were viewed as trouble makers by both teachers and other students. Exclusions had led to criminal behaviour for some as they had nothing else to do.

One student reported that exclusion had actually led to the break up of his family while many others felt that the trauma of exclusion had created low self esteem. Some had later developed a sense of resistance against the system that had labelled them and felt toughened by the experience. Exclusion was seen as part of the same process of labelling that they experienced from institutions in wider society such as the police. Exclusion also led to poor qualifications and poor employment opportunities, though some students had returned successfully to full-time education. A few of the sample welcomed exclusion because it gave them a break from bullying by their peer group or teachers. Some responded by wanting to prove their teachers to be wrong.

Those who had gone on to further education or who had made a successful move into adult life said that they had done so because they had the support of family, friends and their church. Social workers and black community workers were also positive sources of support and care. Some teachers were also seen as supportive within the excluding schools, but generally their support was not felt to be long lasting and consistent. Social workers and black community workers were singled out for praise by most of the students. Students from wealthier backgrounds received financial and social support, as did those in care, but many others were excluded from professional support networks by poverty.

Black families were very supportive of the education system and viewed education as a tool for fighting the racism they experienced in British society. Often they were surprised at the exclusions because, as far as they

were aware, their children had good school records. The exclusion process had left many students disadvantaged, particularly because exclusions had taken place around examination times. This led families to become very disillusioned with the education system. They were supportive of their children and negative about the education system, seeing it as biased in terms of both class and race. Exclusion also had a negative effect on home and family life; parents felt shame in the community and experienced stress. Some had fought hard with the schools over exclusion and had found them to be obstructive and intimidating.

For many of the parents, support consisted of accepting their child's view of the events leading up to the exclusion in preference to the school's version. They believed the teachers to be racist and incapable of controlling their children. In one case there was supporting evidence to suggest that teachers had made an unfair accusation. Families also offered practical support such as helping with work set by the school or going to the library.

Many parents had bad experiences of schooling themselves. In addition, there was an issue with the amount of practical advice about the exclusion and appeals process. This had varied in quality and quantity in each individual case. In one case, a teacher had offered to come to the family home to provide additional tuition; however other schools had failed to provide any work.

EVALUATION

While this study provides a clear picture of the impact of school exclusion on students of African Caribbean descent, we learn little of the causes for exclusion beyond the claims of racism by schools, teachers and other pupils. Clearly, this does not address the full complexity of the situation. However, the value of the study is that we do learn of the detailed and dramatic consequences of school exclusion for the students and their families.