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Executive Summary

A review of school exclusion on the mental health, well-being of children and young people in the City of Sunderland

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Commissioned by Together for Children, Sunderland

March 2020



Executive summary

In the Autumn of 2018, the University of Sunderland was approached by Together for Children to 'investigate the factors that impact upon social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people from 3-16 years in Sunderland which may lead to exclusion from school'. The purpose of the commission was to provide a research-informed review of the process and impact of school exclusion through a detailed examination of the personal lived experiences of children and their caregivers who were excluded from school.

Research aim

To investigate the benefit of school exclusion on those excluded school and their caregivers.

Research objectives:

- To establish the impact of school exclusion on the child and family.
- To explore the effectiveness of the process of school exclusion.
- To determine the drivers for school exclusion.
- To explore the impact of school exclusion on caregivers.
- To determine the effectiveness of alternative provision.
- To produce a report with supporting evidence to inform provision planning and training for education professionals within the local area of Sunderland.

There were 165 individuals who took part in the research, 55 children, 41 of their caregivers, 55 headteachers across age phases and types of provision, 14 Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCOs). The evidence from those interviewed indicate that some schools need training and support to effectively identify and respond to the diverse needs of children in their care. The findings suggest that these children thrive in an environment where there are small classes, flexible policies and in most

cases, a vocational curriculum offer. This research highlights that there are significant, short and long-term effects of school exclusion on children and their families. The impact on the children is that during the exclusion, they are often not doing anything purposeful with their time or being supported to understand any underlying reasons for their behaviour. For the caregivers, they struggled to maintain employment or good mental health due to the stress of the uncertainty of their child's future.

What is clear, is that children and caregivers need to understand why the exclusion happened and to be supported to rebuild relationships within families and to re-engage with education. Headteachers and SENCOs believed that the benefit of school exclusion is not only to keep other children safe but also to fast track the excluded child to specialist support. This shows that schools need further investment to meet children's needs as soon as they become apparent. Without funding for training and staffing, it is difficult to see how the situation of rising exclusions will change. Health services have a fundamental role to play in providing prompt assessments for these children to identify any underlying difficulties and to support schools in understanding and providing reasonable adjustments and evidence-based approaches to learning.

This piece of research is both timely and significant considering the Timpson Review (DfE, 2019a) publication, as it captures the voice of children, caregivers and professionals who work with or who have experienced first-hand exclusion from school. The result of this is a unique piece of primary research believed to be the largest qualitative study of school exclusion to date in England.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Children identified as being at risk of or allocated a fixed-period or permanent exclusion to be referred to health services for assessment of needs. This would determine any underlying genetic, learning disabilities or neurodiverse causes, so that reasonable adjustments are based upon strengths and difficulties. The health, functioning and wellbeing summary traffic light communication tool (Ireland and Horridge, 2016) should be considered for universal use by all health services under the direction of the paediatric disability team.

Recommendation 2: To extend the KS1-4 alternative provision to allow those children thriving in their care to have a permanent placement in the school. This could be in the form of an additional provision so that the current alternative provision school is maintained for those who have recently been permanently excluded with a partner provision for those who mainstream is not a suitable or viable option.

Recommendation 3: To provide prompt preventative support in mainstream and other schools where children are identified as at risk of exclusion. This needs to be coupled with training for education staff including identification of underlying SEND, person-centred approaches, supporting children with challenging behaviours, and compliance with equality duties.

Recommendation 4: The creation of a child, caregiver and sibling support network for those with children on the edge of, or who have been excluded from school. This will include signposting to support systems, including legal advice and access to universal services to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 5: Consistent information to be provided to the caregivers by the excluding school, detailing all local and national contact numbers, support services for the child, caregivers and siblings. This must include details of education provision available in the local area and the appeals process.

Recommendation 6: Documentation following an exclusion needs to be given to the caregivers and the next school placement. This needs to include prior attainment, attendance, behaviour system records, statements of witnesses, caregiver and child communication and responses, the reason for the exclusion and length of exclusion. It must include evidence of the implementation of the graduated approach with a review of progress and evidence-based approaches as part of this process.

National recommendation 1: DfE to update statutory guidance on exclusion to change the terminology from 'should' to 'must' to ensure schools are obligated to address any underlying causes of disruptive behaviour, including the use of a multi-agency assessment. Schools also require clarification of their duties within the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities to prevent substantial disadvantage.

National recommendation 2: DfE need to delegate more powers to Local Authorities to enable them to support children at risk of exclusion and to hold schools to account for their decision to exclude a child to ensure the reason is lawful, reasonable and fair.

National recommendation 3: To rename pupil referral units to schools, due to the stigma of this type of provision.

I would like to sincerely thank Together for Children for commissioning this research, the caregivers and children for taking the time to share your stories and the headteachers and SENCOs for speaking honestly and openly about your experiences.

Sarah Martin-Denham
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