

## Northern Ireland Suspension and Expulsion Study (1996/97)

### Key Findings

- During the academic year 1996/97 2,631 pupils were reported as having been suspended from school. The total number of suspensions was 3,748. The vast majority of these pupils were from post primary education and in particular secondary schools, with male suspensions outnumbering female suspensions by approximately 5:1.
- Reasons for suspension tended to be repetitive acts of "low level misbehaviour" with acts of violence accounting for 19% of all suspensions. Just under 6% of pupils were suspended for truancy.
- While 74% of all suspended pupils received only one period of suspension there was a group of pupils who experienced three or more suspensions (11%). The latter group of pupils were more likely to be male, attending secondary schools, in receipt of free school meals, have lower rates of attendance and be known to a range of support agencies.

### Figure 1

- The pattern of suspensions varied according to school type. Within the secondary school sector (where most suspensions occurred), 15% of schools had "no suspensions", 25% were "low suspending", 28% were "moderate suspending" and 33% were "high suspending". This pattern was reversed for grammar and primary schools, while special schools had higher percentages of schools with no suspensions and a small number with high suspension rates.
- Most schools appear to be successful in managing the behaviour of the majority of their pupils without resort to suspension. The most common and useful strategies which emerged for maintaining pupils with behavioural problems were: well developed behavioural policies; the identification, monitoring and support of pupils "at risk"; training of teaching staff in classroom management; and utilising the support of parents. Only 30% of secondary schools mentioned pastoral care as a strategy, and few primary, grammar or special schools referred to this as a tactic for behaviour management.
- There were 76 pupils reported as expelled from school, with this group having a similar profile to that of pupils who experienced multiple suspensions. Only five of these pupils returned to full-time education. The education that the remaining expelled pupils were receiving was primarily in the form of home tuition (30%), with 15% having no form of educational input.

### The Research

1. The research was divided into two phases and had two broad aims. Phase 1 was a monitoring exercise in which suspensions and expulsions in all schools in Northern Ireland were recorded during the academic year 1996/97 by the project. Phase 2 involved a survey of schools and investigated the suspension and expulsion process at school level with a focus on how pupils who pose behavioural problems are managed within the school system.

#### **Phase 1 : Monitoring of suspensions and expulsions from schools in Northern Ireland 1996/97**

2. The Education and Library Boards (ELBs) were asked to use an agreed suspension form within their area and to ask schools to complete and return a form for every suspension which occurred. These forms were returned to the project on a monthly basis. Expulsions were monitored on a termly basis with each ELB completing a form providing information about all

pupils expelled within their area. A number of problems arose with the monitoring procedure; in particular there was often incomplete detail on the pupil suspended and failure on the part of some schools to notify the ELBs about suspensions. The continued use of these "informal suspensions" for which forms were not returned was commented on in the Education Welfare focus groups. In the case of expulsions some of the ELBs indicated they did not keep records of pupils expelled from maintained, voluntary grammar or integrated schools.

3. On the basis of the returned forms there were 2,631 pupils suspended during the academic year of 1996/97, though this is likely to be an underestimation given the omissions outlined above. The majority of these pupils were from the post primary sector, mainly Year 11, Year 10 and Year 12 respectively in secondary schools while most primary school suspensions were from P7 (see Figure 1). Social workers, educational psychologists and education welfare officers (EWOs) expressed concern about an increase in suspensions in this sector. Only a small minority of the suspensions came from special schools but it is a matter of concern that any suspensions were from this sector, particularly when children were suspended from schools especially established to manage pupils with emotional and behavioural problems.

4. When the reasons for suspension were considered approximately 52% of pupils were suspended for non violent behaviour: this included abusive language (11%) and disruption (16%), and repetitive acts of "low level misbehaviour" as described in the Elton Report (1989) (see Figure 2). Also included within this category are breach of school uniform or hairstyle code and failure to do detention and homework. Just under 6% pupils were suspended for truancy which is also a non violent behaviour. However it has been kept as a separate category because it seems particularly inappropriate to legitimise absence from school for those pupils actively seeking to avoid attending school. Suspension for acts of violence against teachers or other pupils within school accounts for 19% of all suspensions, with 2% directed against teachers. When this is combined with dangerous or threatening behaviour and fighting it accounted for approximately 25% of suspensions. Bullying was specified as a reason for suspension in only 2% of cases. While this may appear to be surprisingly low it is possible that incidents included among the categories 'fighting', 'attack on pupil', 'dangerous/threatening behaviour' and 'abusive language' may have involved elements of bullying behaviour which were not identified as such by the school. Suspensions for sectarian behaviour directed against either teachers or pupils within school were rare and accounted for under one percent of the total.

#### Figure 2

5. A group of pupils who were suspended three or more times during the academic year ( $n = 281$ , 11% of total sample) were identified as 'multiple' suspensions with 89% of these pupils being boys. In terms of school background the majority were from secondary schools (85%), 6% attended primary, 3.6% grammar and the remaining 5% were in special schools. Compared to the overall group of suspended pupils, grammar school pupils were much less likely to have three or more suspensions. Pupils with 'multiple' suspensions were significantly more likely to be in receipt of free school meals and have lower rates of attendance (though this is likely to be related to their high suspension rates), as well as being known to a range of support agencies; they thus could be described as more socially disadvantaged than their peers.

6. While single suspensions may work for the majority of pupils it would appear that for the small minority of pupils suspension is clearly not effective. A number of principals agreed that multiple suspensions were not the solution but used them to give the teacher and other pupils respite from the disruptive child or young person. It may well be that many of the group of pupils who received multiple suspensions could be considered in need of intensive support rather than punishment and if this is the case alternative strategies need to be considered here.

### **Expelled Pupils**

7. During the period of the research 76 pupils were reported as expelled from school, with the vast majority being males from secondary schools, with maintained and controlled secondary schools expelling a similar number of pupils. While most of the expelled pupils were from Year 11 just under 40% were from Years 8, 9 and 10 which is a cause for concern given that these pupils could potentially be out of school for quite some time. Over half of the expelled pupils were entitled to free school meals which would suggest that many of them come from socially disadvantaged areas. Eight of the pupils either had a statement of special educational needs or were waiting for one to be completed and a number of principals expressed the view that expelled pupils had special educational needs which required provision to suit these needs. The most common reason for expulsions was serious/persistent misbehaviour, followed by physical aggression and illegal activities.

8. Only five of the expelled pupils returned to full-time education. Of those who were out of school at the time of the study 15% had no educational input recorded and those who had were receiving at best part-time provision. Education welfare officers expressed concern about this and were particularly worried about the future education of pupils whose parents had been persuaded to withdraw them from school without formal expulsion. Similarly, education psychologists were concerned about using home tuition for expelled pupils since it was unlikely to meet the academic or social needs of pupils. This concern was shared by social workers who believed that some pupils expelled from school were potentially at risk, with families already under pressure failing to cope with a young person 'out of school' and requesting social services to intervene by taking the young person into care.

## **Phase 2 : Survey of Northern Ireland Schools**

9. Phase 2 results are based on survey returns from 135 primary, 201 post-primary, and 37 special schools.

10. Statistical information from Phase 1 was used to categorise responding schools into "no suspensions", "low suspensions", "moderate suspensions" and "high suspensions". Figure 3 shows that the majority of primary schools did not suspend any pupils and only a small number were found to have "moderate" or "high" suspensions. In the post primary sector more secondary schools were found to have "high suspensions" than grammar schools. Within the secondary sector there was an even spread across the levels of suspension, while in the grammar sector most fell in the "no" and "low" suspension levels. Slightly more than two thirds of special schools had no suspensions though a small number of schools which dealt with emotional and behavioural problems had high suspension rates. In the primary sector there was a highly significant relationship between suspension rate and catchment area, with all but two suspensions occurring in schools with an urban catchment area. A disproportionate number of pupils who were suspended from grammar schools came from socially disadvantaged areas.

\* A low suspension rate is less than one suspension per hundred pupils, a moderate suspension rate is between one and three suspensions per hundred pupils, and a high suspension rate is three or more suspensions per hundred pupils.

### Figure 3

11. When examining how schools maintain pupils with behavioural problems a number of strategies were identified. These include the development and implementation of appropriate policies (pastoral and behavioural), the identification, monitoring and support of pupils considered to be "at risk" of suspension/expulsion, training of teaching staff in classroom management, and utilising the support of parents. The extent to which Northern Ireland schools use these strategies is discussed below.

## **Development and implementation of policies**

12. Although most schools stated they had a behaviour policy Figure 4 shows that the people least likely to be involved in drafting the policy were parents and pupils. It is disappointing in the light of the Elton Report that many schools still do not involve parents and pupils to a greater extent since research indicates that their involvement in the development of behaviour policies can have a positive and beneficial effect (DES : 1989). It also ignores the Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 12) which states that children have the right to express their opinion in decisions relating to them (HMSO : 1989). Moreover, in about half of all schools the Board of Governors was not involved in drawing up the school's discipline policy. Both EWOs and educational psychologists were of the opinion that suspension was used by some schools because of a failure to implement a discipline policy. In all sectors behaviour policies concentrated more on sanctions than rewards, with this being especially so in the post primary sector. Within this sector secondary schools were more likely than grammar to include information about rewards in their behaviour policy. Furthermore not all schools provided parents and pupils with copies of their behaviour policy, although abbreviated versions were sometimes distributed. Some primary and special schools indicated they preferred to display "rules" in the classroom.

Figure 4

### **Identification, monitoring and supporting pupils**

13. Most schools had some mechanisms for identifying and monitoring pupils who posed management difficulties. Proportionally fewer primary than post primary schools had such a mechanism possibly due to the small number of primary schools indicating they had problems with behaviour management. Few primary schools and only 30% of secondary schools identified their pastoral care system as a mechanism for identifying pupils with behaviour problems. Similarly, few schools made a connection between the identification of behaviour problems and Stages 1 - 3 of the Code of Practice, and this view was supported by educational psychologists who felt that schools did not perceive emotional and behavioural difficulties as a special need. Associated with behaviour management is the need to maintain records. Most schools appeared to be aware of this but within some schools there was excessive duplication. MIDAS, a package within CLASS (Computerised Local Administration System for Schools) for recording pupil behaviour was used in a number of post primary but in few primary and no special schools.

14. Most schools indicated they had strategies in place to promote good behaviour within school. Post primary schools had the greatest range of strategies but rewards/awards, praise and a positive ethos were the most popular across all sectors. Approximately half of post primary and special schools had a facility which allowed for the temporary withdrawal from class of pupils who were causing behaviour problems. Secondary schools were more likely than grammar to have such a facility. Primary schools were not asked whether they had withdrawal facilities since it was felt they would not feature in this sector in great numbers. Most schools limited withdrawal to less than one week and the maximum allowed by any school was two terms. A few schools, more special than post primary, indicated they set no time limit on withdrawal.

15. The majority of schools had pupils referred to a range of support services. Figure 5 shows those provided by the ELBs and accessed directly by schools. In particular educational psychology was seen as the lead agency by schools when issues of behaviour arose. Post primary schools referred to education welfare more frequently than other sectors when behaviour problems arose, and this may be due to a need to access parents, which EWOs are able to facilitate, and/or the difficulty of getting referrals accepted by educational psychology. Special schools have a higher percentage of pupils referred to social services, child guidance and the "other" category (which included a wide range of health services) because of the special needs of many of their pupils. The low referral rate of special school pupils to certain of these services is because many of these pupils will already have been exposed to such provision. Social workers, educational psychologists and education welfare officers, while acknowledging the difficulties, all emphasised the necessity for agencies to

work in co-operation with each other and stressed the need for a planned approach in the delivery of multi-agency support.

#### Figure 5

16. Some schools offered support for pupils returning from a period of suspension. However, information about the support was frequently vague and little was mentioned that schools did not already provide as part of their prevention strategies. EWOs were critical about the lack of re-integration strategies in many schools which resulted in suspended pupils returning to school without any support: however, a number of principals commented that due to education reform they now have less time than in the past to provide individual support such as counselling for pupils.

#### **Training in classroom management**

17. Many principals stated that there was a need for more staff training in classroom management if disruptive pupils are to be maintained in mainstream schools, a view supported by educational psychologists. Staff in special schools had had most training in this area and this was frequently carried out on a whole school basis. Such an approach would appear to be beneficial in that it is more likely to lead to consistency in practice.

18. Training in the legal aspects of suspension and expulsion had been provided to almost three-quarters of secondary, two-thirds of special and half of primary schools.

#### **Utilising parent support**

19. Most schools indicated that, in general, parents were supportive but approximately a fifth stated they sometimes experienced difficulties getting parents to come into school if behaviour problems arose. In all sectors there was a small percentage of parents who were not supportive and a larger percentage who failed to be co-operative when problems arose around the behaviour of their child. Several principals commented that when parents were supportive of the school success could be achieved in changing behaviour. Educational psychologists and social workers felt that in some schools when problems occurred with pupil management there was a tendency to put the blame on the pupil, the parent or community and that schools were sometimes unwilling to look at their own practice as a possible factor.

#### **Key Recommendations**

20. The recommendations in the report include the following:

- There is a need for a standardised monitoring procedure to ensure reliable and valid measures across Northern Ireland. This would allow schools to identify at an early stage pupils who are frequently suspended and to discover if behaviour management problems occur at specific times and places. Furthermore, ELBs and CCMS need to ensure that schools comply with such procedures, and utilise the information provided to identify and provide support for schools with a high level of suspensions and pupils who experience multiple suspensions. DENI needs to support the ELBs in this and ensure that all schools are aware of their legal obligations.
- Within the spirit of The Children (NI) Order 1995 and The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the views of pupils need to be considered when drawing up policies which affect them. The Code of Practice needs to be applied to pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in the same way as it is applied to pupils with learning difficulties. It is unfair to these pupils if they are treated via a discipline system which removes them from the school as an easy alternative to providing for their needs.
- Most schools were managing behaviour successfully through a variety of strategies including suspension. Some schools used 'multiple suspensions' frequently and in

order to limit this it might be helpful for schools to review their re-integration strategies to ensure adequate support for pupils returning to school.

- A number of schools experienced severe problems with a small minority of pupils. In such instances it is unreasonable to expect schools to cope without adequate support services. Educational psychologists, EWOs and social workers all mentioned lack of resources as a problem. The preferred option was a proactive planned strategy which offered a way to maintain the majority of pupils within mainstream education. An important shortfall in provision was the lack of facilities which could offer education, child psychiatry, psychological support and family therapy on the one site. ELBs need to take a co-ordinated multi disciplinary and multi agency approach to ensure provision either within the mainstream and/or in alternative education.

## **Methodology**

21. Phase 1 was a monitoring exercise in which suspensions and expulsions in all schools in Northern Ireland were recorded during the academic year 1996/97 by the project. Phase 2 of the research was achieved by means of a questionnaire to all post primary schools, special schools and a sample of primary schools (consisting of schools which had used suspensions during the previous academic year plus a random sample of one in ten primary schools). The views of education welfare officers, educational psychologists and social workers were also sought through focus groups and individual interviews.

## **The Project**

22. The project was undertaken for DENI by the Graduate School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast. The cost was £32,772.

## **Full Report**

23. The full report entitled 'The 1996/97 Northern Ireland Suspension and Expulsion Study', DENI Research Report Series No. 12, by Rosemary Kilpatrick, Alexandra Barr and Caroline Wylie is available from DENI, cost £5\*.

\* Each educational institution and library is entitled to one free copy.

***This paper is a summary of the research report, and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of DENI.***

## **Bibliography**

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