



ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROVISION (AEP) IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Key Findings

- ◆ There is no standard formula for funding or supporting the range of alternative education providers, which results in an inequality at the point of delivery to the young person.
- ◆ The profile of young people entering Alternative Education Provision (AEP) varies considerably between types of project. Those in Community-based AEP are more likely to come from dysfunctional families, and along with young people from Training Organisation/School (TO/S) Partnerships, have disengaged from school learning. In contrast, the majority of the Key Stage 4 Flexibility Initiative (KS4FI) intake live in relatively stable and supportive family structures and report positive experiences of school.
- ◆ Given the different starting points for young people at AEP entry, those in Community-based AEP and, to a lesser extent, those in TO/S Partnerships fare extremely well when compared with the KS4FI cohort considering the socio-economic barriers they have overcome.

- ◆ Those in Community-based AEP and TO/S Partnerships developed a better sense of career and personal pathways over the transitional period than their counterparts in KS4FI. Family support was an important factor in establishing a smooth transition and it would appear that AEP staff provide an alternative support system where family support is limited or unavailable.
- ◆ AEP is successful in re-engaging a considerable number of disaffected young people, with most young people in the study leaving their projects with some level of qualification. Six months after leaving AEP, over three quarters of the young people were in education, training or employment and 18 months post-AEP, over two-thirds of them were in education, training and employment.
- ◆ Though a range of qualifications was available to young people on AEP these were generally perceived to be of little value at labour market entry by either the young people themselves or the AEP staff.
- ◆ There was much evidence that the role of AEP staff (especially the teaching staff) was seen as peripheral to that of those involved in mainstream provision and therefore not of equivalent value. For example, teaching staff did not have automatic access to continuous professional development courses and nor did any of the projects visited have access to standard educational psychology or welfare services.
- ◆ An extremely valuable knowledge base of methods and techniques for engaging learners has been developed in AEP and much greater use could be made of this body of expertise particularly in mainstream education.
- ◆ Those leaving AEP remain at risk of social exclusion because post-16 support is not always readily available and/or accessible and when it is, it is frequently not appropriate for these young people's needs.
- ◆ While there was some indication of effective interagency working within AEP projects there was little evidence of inter-agency support for these young people once they left AEP. This lack of formal support could result in any gains that had been made during the young people's time in AEP being lost, and urgent attention should be paid to addressing this issue.

INTRODUCTION

1. Increasingly, attention has been paid to young people at risk of being, or who are, excluded from school and the greater chance these young people have of remaining socially excluded once they enter adult life. Since the early 1990s a number of alternative education initiatives have developed across Northern Ireland in response to those who have disengaged from mainstream education. More recently there also has been a policy response from the Department of Education to offer pupils at Key Stage 4 (age 14-16) a more flexible curriculum with the aim of re-engaging learners, improving behaviour, attendance, motivation and raising achievement (ETI, 2002).
2. Despite the differences in the rationale for the range of alternative education available, the outcomes for personal and social development are similar. However, the published research has paid little attention to documenting academic achievements, qualifications or economic benefits of any of the schemes and there is little follow up of these young people to discover if any benefits are maintained in the longer term.
3. In 2003, the Department of Education commissioned research to provide 'a greater understanding of the key factors determining the young people's experiences and destinations and help to guide future planning of AEP provision in terms of in school provision, school and community-based provision and out of school provision.'

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

4. The aim of the research was:

'To examine the AEP experience of young people in terms of effective engagement with learning, re-integration into mainstream provision, accreditation achievement and transition to the labour market with a view to assessing the effectiveness of this means of intervention and help guide further planning of provision in each of the three types of AEP.'

5. In order to achieve this aim the research traced the progress toward adult working life of a cohort of young people who were in their final year of compulsory education in 2002/03 or 2003/04 and engaged in alternative education provision.
6. The objectives of the research were to:
 - (i) track retrospectively, the education experience and achievements of a cohort of young people who have had a placement in one of three types of AEP (at least two nominated projects of each type) during their final year of compulsory education in 2002/03;
 - (ii) track the destinations, subsequent training, vocational/academic qualifications and employment history of the cohort from the time they leave compulsory education in the summer of 2003 through to September 2005;
 - (iii) identify the young people's family circumstances, their economic status, attitudes to education (mainstream and alternative) and formal training, and their hopes, and plans;
 - (iv) Compare the findings for the AEP cohort with a peer group of young people who are out of mainstream education and who have been referred for Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) in the form of home tuition for reasons other than ill health;
 - (v) Document the three types of alternative education provision provided, thus highlighting similarities and differences in purpose, referral criteria, curriculum, resources, staffing and other factors that may influence the effectiveness of each type of provision.

MAIN FINDINGS

Types of alternative education provision

7. Three types of Alternative Education Provision (AEP) were under consideration in the research: Community-based Provision; Training Organisation/School Partnerships and Key Stage 4 Flexibility Initiative.

8. Community-based Provision tends to be funded by statutory and voluntary bodies and this local community response has traditionally provided for those young people who are out of school either by their own volition or as a result of the formal exclusion process. The young people in this provision have a greater chance of coming from a dysfunctional family, with many having been in care. They may have damaging experiences of bullying, school phobia, family trauma, paramilitary involvement and mental health problems. Teaching is either led by a qualified youth worker or teacher and generally there is a greater emphasis on personal and social development given the limited educational suite they can offer pupils due to both resources and teaching expertise. Funding is distributed in an ad hoc way and invariably is short term and often unstable.

9. Training Organisation/School (TO/S) Partnerships are similar to the youth training model of the 1980s and often have experience of delivering training programmes to the young unemployed. Pupils referred to TO/S Partnerships are either at risk of exclusion from school or unlikely to achieve 5 grades at GCSE. Some young people reported stable family structures but many found school lacking any stimulation and often felt that academic expectations of them were low. Pupils in this cohort also reported problems of bullying, learning difficulties, mental ill-health and a breakdown of the relationship with the school. TO/S Partnerships offer an out-of-school alternative, which is vocationally based with some also able to offer GCSEs in maths and English. Teaching staff are drawn from both qualified teachers and professionals with a background in vocational training and Essential Skills.

10. The Key Stage 4 Flexibility Initiative (KS4FI) was introduced in 2000 by the Department of Education to encourage schools to explore new ways of approaching the curriculum at 14-16 years. Many schools have developed partnerships with the Further Education sector in order to deliver a range of vocational subjects at NVQ Level 1, which is offered in tandem with a reduced number of GCSE subjects. Pupils involved in KS4FI are most often recommended to participate by their school and do not view the programme as alternative provision. Pupils are most likely to live in stable family structures and often seek advice and support from their parents. They also report having a positive school experience up to AEP entry.

Young people's transition into alternative education

11. Many of the young people interviewed did not understand why they had been placed in AEP or had little or no information about the project before they joined.
12. Both young people and staff from Community-based provision and TO/S Partnerships felt that there was stigma attached to alternative education. Many cited AEP as either a 'sin bin' or as provision for the 'stupid', further stigmatising young people who attend. Conversely, KS4FI was seen as a continuation of school provision in partnership with the local FE College and not considered to be 'alternative provision' by either staff or pupils.
13. As highlighted in previous research, the funding associated with the young person is often not transferred to the AEP project. In addition, there is little sharing of information about the young person and the circumstances surrounding their referral to the AEP project.
14. Most of the young people reported disengagement from school, and cited a range of school factors that seem to 'steer' them towards exclusion.

The AEP learning and working environment

15. Concern was raised over the limited access to physical resources including ICT equipment available to young people on AEP. Additionally, in some settings standards of the fabric of the built environment were worryingly poor.
16. Some staff in AEP experienced difficulty delivering elements of the Northern Ireland Curriculum to young people because of lack of training and support.
17. It was evident that the available curriculum was very narrow for some young people due to the lack of qualified teachers in many AEP projects. In particular, there was little or no access to areas such as Art, Science and PE. Those in Community-based AEP did not have the same access to work related learning as their counterparts in KS4FI or TO/S partnerships.
18. These restrictions on the available curriculum were compounded by the gendered nature of provision in most projects. Vocational opportunities

were limited to traditional roles, and any request for access to courses outside these often was not facilitated.

19. Except in KS4FI, AEP staff had little opportunity for career progression and job security demonstrated in the fact that they have no access to in service training (INSET) nor indeed do they have a teacher number. AEP is not an attractive career, in that there is little inducement, other than personal satisfaction to remain in post.
20. There was almost no access to various educational support service agencies for staff or pupils in the community based projects including curriculum advisory support services and Educational Psychology services.
21. Teachers in schools were disappointed with the alternative suite of vocational related qualifications developed to augment the disapplication curriculum and reported that many employers did not understand or rate the alternatives on offer.
22. Funding instability creates further difficulties in providing alternative education, especially for community based provision. A disproportionate amount of time has to be spent by management committees and project staff chasing funds and planning can never be long-term. Given that membership of management committees is on a voluntary basis, an undue burden is placed upon their goodwill. The impact of these sorts of problems can mean that essential provision, valued by pupils and the wider community, is ended.

Outcomes for young people on AEP

23. Most young people leave AEP with some level of qualification (ranging from Entry Level Qualifications to GCSE Grade A-C). Although most participants enjoyed AEP, the curriculum and qualifications available to them are perceived as having a reduced value in the labour market. This also includes KS4FI pupils who would have liked to have had the opportunity to study for a greater number of GCSEs.
24. Six months after leaving AEP, over three-quarters of respondents were in education, training or employment and 18 months post-AEP, over two thirds of respondents were in education, training and employment. Those from

both Community-based Provision and TO/S Partnerships fared well considering the additional barriers they were confronted with on entering AEP relating to their socio economic profile.

25. Eighteen months post-AEP, the majority of young people educated in TO/S Partnerships and Community-based Provision had a clear sense of future career progression identified, with KS4FI faring less well, with over half having no clear plans for the future.
26. Overall, boys seem to be achieving better outcomes than girls two years after leaving AEP. Girls over the period of 18 months were increasingly likely to become economically inactive. One explanation of this may lie in the high numbers of teenage pregnancies resulting in girls dropping out from education, training or employment.

Young people's participation

27. Using peer researchers to encourage participation was an effective way of communicating with many of the 'hard to reach' young people in the sample. In-depth interviews conducted by peer researchers enabled the rich and powerful experiences of the young people to be shared.
28. Although there were difficulties associated with recruiting, training, managing and retaining the peer researcher team, it was a worthwhile strategy for the research team, the peer researchers and the participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for mainstream education

29. Many of the young people who eventually participate in AEP are at risk of social exclusion and face a raft of complex and difficult experiences that impacts on their ability to engage in school. These include issues relating to mental health, as well as the impact of family breakdown. Schools require more support and knowledge to help them to support pupils through such issues.
30. Earlier identification of children's problems and more preventative work in primary schools, including support for children with special needs, is

required. Often schools are not equipped to deal with and reroute difficult behaviour. By the time some of these young people are 'in' the system, it becomes extremely difficult to reverse the trend.

31. Evidence from the research suggests that pupils experiencing AEP across the range of providers respond very positively to the teaching style, method and learning environment. A challenge for the education system is the transfer of such understanding, skill and expertise from alternative education into mainstream schooling. The Department of Education should consider ways of inculcating teaching successes in alternative provision within the mainstream sector.
32. Young people should be afforded the opportunity to participate more fully in their referral to AEP. Current good practice including family visits could be replicated elsewhere in the sector. It would be important for pupils to be provided with clear information on the range of qualifications available to them on AEP. AEP providers should also be given a more detailed profile on the young person once referred.

Recommendations to provide additional support for AEP providers

33. AEP providers have emphasised that the introduction of the Entitlement Framework will only compound the problems described above. In effect, young people emerging from AEP in future will be even more disadvantaged compared to their peers who have remained in mainstream schooling. Support should be made available to AEP from a range of professional support including CCEA and the Education and Library Board CASS teams.
34. Consideration should be given to the resource and physical environment of AEP and the potential to share and access mainstream resources with a view to improving the quality and range of activities and subjects available. This would need to be achieved in a sensitive manner to avoid any alienation of the young people and staff concerned.
35. Successful AEP often relies on the efforts of highly motivated and committed individuals. However, it seems that there is little except personal satisfaction for them in terms of any rewards for their efforts: they often work in a poor environment and have no financial security or career

progression. Nor, it appears, have they any systematic or coherent support from the wider system, even though they are dealing with the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in our society. These issues need to be addressed with a high degree of urgency before the AEP community become completely alienated and excluded from the mainstream education system.

36. Funding for AEP should be reviewed to include an economic formula based on the educational entitlement of the young person as opposed to the ad hoc nature and inequalities associated with the current system.

Recommendations to provide additional support to those leaving alternative education

37. Many of these young people have disengaged from learning for a substantial part of their adolescence and require additional support to assist them in the reintegration process post-16. Further work on personal and social development is required to help these young people maintain the benefits gained from AEP. As young adults entering the world of further training and employment, they will need support in making decisions about competing pathways and qualifications, how to obtain and sustain employment, and how to ground their aspirations in their achievements to date. Unfortunately, young people leaving AEP often do not access the relevant careers support. The Careers Service should consider ways to promote the visibility of their services to this client group.
38. Young people requiring support from health and welfare services face obstacles in accessing help if they have not been referred to Social Services before the age of 16 years. No agency has responsibility for them, so if services are needed, they must self-refer. Even if support is then forthcoming, it may not be specific to young people under 18 years old, so that for example, a 17 year old may be referred as an in-patient to an unsuitable adult mental health facility. A real priority for change is the development of a coherent, genuine inter-agency support system, to help those young people leaving AEP, but who still require systematic help in order to move productively into adult and working life. In particular, the identification of a 'significant' adult, to monitor progress, and who can intervene where appropriate, in discussion with the young person when support is needed. Such a system has now been developed for young

people leaving care, and should be extended to this other group of very vulnerable young people. If resourced properly, this is a service which could be provided by the current network of AEP.

39. It is frequently assumed that interagency work will simply 'happen' but effort and time must be spent on learning how to engage in such collaboration and ways of overcoming barriers to such work need to be identified. In order to improve interconnected, interagency work within AEP, further staff training and development is required to offer vulnerable young people tailored post 16 support. A way to share information appropriately about young people's backgrounds and experiences should be considered to effect real interagency working.
40. As boys seem to be achieving better outcomes than girls two years after leaving AEP, the reasons as to why this may be the case need to be examined in much greater depth.
41. It is important that more work be carried out locally to build on the existing knowledge base and further develop the practice of co-opting peer researchers when researching young people.

METHODOLOGY

42. Research was conducted over the period April 2003-March 2006 by a team of researchers based in Queen's University Belfast in collaboration with a group of peer researchers from the community. The peer researchers were recruited and trained to help design and conduct aspects of the research. It was also hoped that they would facilitate the engagement of the young people involved in the study and reduce the expected high attrition rate. Seven projects were identified by the Department of Education to take part in the research (at least two of each type of the three types of provision detailed above), and all those young people who were in their final year of compulsory schooling in 2002/03 and 2003/04 and attending one of the identified projects were invited to take part in the research. This gave an initial sample of 318 young people. These young people were then followed up at 6, 12 and 18 months after they had left AEP by means of telephone interviews to ascertain their progress and destination.

43. The data collected and analysed for the study included:
- ◆ Up to three telephone interviews with the young people in the sample drawn from the range of AEP (ie community-based provision, Training Organisation/School partnerships, Key Stage 4 Flexibility);
 - ◆ Interviews with staff from each project;
 - ◆ Documentary evidence from each project;
 - ◆ Focus groups with young people, AEP project staff and relevant professionals (ie careers advisors, education welfare);
 - ◆ In depth case study interviews with 18 young people.

THE PROJECT

44. The project was undertaken for the Department of Education by the Institute of Child Care Research and the Graduate School of Education at Queen's University Belfast. The cost of the project was £82,042. The OFMDFM funded the peer researcher element of the study including their training and payment.

FULL REPORT

45. The full report entitled "Out of the Box: Alternative Education Provision (AEP) in Northern Ireland" by Rosemary Kilpatrick, Claire McCartan, Penny McKeown with Tony Gallagher is available on the Department of Education website at http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

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