

Pupils at Risk of School

Exclusion

Report for Schools

November 2010

Key Findings

This report sets out findings from a study of pupils displaying challenging behaviour in the classroom. The aim of the research was to explore:

- How disruptive pupils themselves make sense of their behaviour;
- What values they hold and what identities they draw on;
- How they understand their relationships with teachers, parents, peers and other significant individuals.

Education and School

- Most of the pupils participating in the research attributed strong value to the ideal of education, even in the context of severe academic under achievement. Education was generally viewed as a key determinant of future success and happiness.

Researcher: "What would make you proud of yourself?"

Clem (12): "Getting an education."

"I wanna learn, and I don't wanna be one of them kids who don't go school and just stay at home." (Alfie, 13)

"I still need my English and maths and stuff like that." (Damian, 12)

"Leave friends till the last and education is first." (Charpane, 13)

- Many pupils identified curriculum based subjects like maths, science or English as enjoyable, although this was highly dependent on the relationship they established with the teacher.
- Some pupils who had fallen behind retained a hope that they would be able to recover their stride and start learning again in the future, but many others feared their chance of gaining an education had already passed them by.

Researcher: “So if you had a son or daughter, Curtis and you could give them any advice, what sort of advice would you give them?”

Curtis (12): “Take in their education in school, because I never took it in that much... Because if you go school and you get a good, you do your GCSEs, and if you get all your GCSEs, right, you go college, and then you study for what you wanna be.”

- Pupils often expressed strong attachment to their school. Hostility and resentment tended to be directed towards particular teachers rather than the school itself. Positive experiences of school were most often articulated in terms of friendship networks, opportunities for creative learning and close supportive relationships with school staff.

Family

- Deeply held values around family were expressed with an emphasis on loyalty, love and dependability. Family was generally described by pupils as the most important thing in their lives.

“Cos family, they brought you up and everything, they brought you up yeah, they was there for you, you meet friends half way through your life. You might have friends all through your life and stuff, but basically your mum, mum like brought you into this world and if you disrespect that then basically how you gonna make your mum feel like. She loves you very much. She wanted to have you and everything.”
(Luke, 14)

- Pupils were highly sensitive and protective about their family relationships. The value attached to mothers in particular was experienced as intensely personal and precious. Parents were often described as role models.

“Without your mum you’re nothing.” (Tanisha, 14)

- Pupils saw their parents (most often mothers) as powerful advocates for their welfare, standing up for their rights and challenging injustices and confronting unreasonable teachers.
- Fathers and other male family members were commonly identified by young men as offering a potential bridge into the world of work. Many described their intention to access career advice, work experience and useful contacts through family networks.

“I’ll go to work with my dad sometimes as well... I just like help out, like lift stuff up, sweep up ... but he’s going to start teaching me after like ... when I leave school and stuff like that” (Luke, 14)

Vulnerability and Risk

- Fear of street violence was very high among the pupils participating in the study. Nearly all the young men had been threatened and or robbed and some had been hospitalised with knife wounds.

“Basically I was just waiting for them to do it, like ... because they said to me so many times that ‘We’re gonna stab you, We’re gonna do this ... gonna do it’.” (Luke, 14)

- The pupils lived with a heightened sense of territory and built identities around their post codes. Journeys to and from school could be regarded as hazardous, particularly for pupils crossing boroughs. Protection was provided by friends in neighbouring areas or by belonging to a particular ‘clique’ (a gang like association).

“...Stay in [own area] don’t go nowhere else...if you’re gonna go anywhere else go with your man, boy...that’s all I’m saying...cos’ if you’re moving by yourself and not bare [loads of] ...boys [from own area] you’re gonna get moved to...[approached/robbed/attacked by boys in that area.]” (Keishawn, 13)

- Pupils felt there was a lack of protection offered to them. Getting marked out as troublemakers was thought to ensure they were always seen as perpetrators rather than potential victims. Pupils might avoid approaching teachers or police officers because of this, even in the context of severe threat and anxiety.
- Pupils also described feeling vulnerable in the classroom and accorded great power to teachers. They assumed that they would not be listened to or believed and appeared to have little sense of their own power to disrupt, threaten and subvert.

Anger

- The expression of anger was characterised by high levels of ambivalence and contradiction. While often discussed as a troublesome emotion it was also often associated with power and control.

“Like when I’m angry, people can’t stop me, they have to just let me do what I do, because I’m gonna switch on you....For some reason when I’m angry, and I have to do something, I will do it, and then I will calm down. I cannot calm down and not do it.....I don’t have, er, like, er, second thoughts. I don’t think of any. Once, something is in my mind, once I have a task to do something, I’m doing it, I’m not gonna , I’m not gonna worry about this, or worry about that, I will just do it. I don’t know ... it’s like I don’t have no fear, I don’t know, I just go into a different world. Everybody knows that. ‘Don’t touch Marcus’.” (Marcus, 15)

- Social and relational dynamics shaped and informed the acting out of anger to negotiate and re-negotiate relationships inside and outside of school.

“These two boys... kept on bullying me, and then one day ... one day I come in, because, like, my clothes are dirty, I come in in stripy dungarees, like ... and I was in Year 1, and one of them was laughing, and then there was this train thing, and he climbed to the top, and I kicked him off. And after that he stopped bullying me. And another one say, “Just because you beat up one of my friend, don’t mean I’ll stop bullying you”, and then he ... he laughed at me ... he laughed at my dungarees and said, “Where did your mum get that? Oxfam?” And then I punched his teeth out.”(Jake, 12)

- Large numbers of pupils described themselves as having anger management problems, but many were also somewhat invested in this as a diagnosis. Unrestrained expression of anger had a protective function and could earn pupils a formidable reputation amongst peers and potential contenders on the street.
- Some pupils actively cultivated the image that they were 'mad' or unhinged. Investing in this kind of intimidating identity could be a risky strategy. Unboundaried expression of anger not only led to school exclusion, it could also raise the stakes in physical conflicts.

Migrant Pupils

- Many of the pupils taking part in the research had not been born in the UK, and were relatively newly arrived in the country. They often transferred from primary school while still in the process of adapting to their new lives in London. The particular challenges they faced in adapting rapidly to language and cultural differences could be camouflaged by a desire to blend in.

“The kids, like, because I can’t speak English, the kids was, like, taking the mick out of me. So I end up fighting. I couldn’t speak ... I didn’t know how to speak it. I didn’t know, I couldn’t tell no one, so that’s, like, why I was ... like, I saw them last, like a month ago, I saw the guy the guy from the primary school I used to go, and, like, I ask him, “Why ... was it like that? Do you remember me?” He was, like, “Yeah, you’re the kid from the primary school, I was taking the mick”. I was like, “Yeah”, I was like, “Why you don’t take the mick now?” Because I can speak English, and he just walk away.” (Max,12)

- Pupils from migrant families could find it difficult to settle and establish a secure and safe base. As well as dealing with the practical difficulties associated with resettlement, some had experienced considerable disruption and trauma.

“My uncle died in Jamaica he got shot 12 times and I was angry I felt like I wanted to kill someone” (Damien, 12).

- A lack of local knowledge and social connections inevitably disadvantaged newly arrived pupils. Peer popularity and earning a tough reputation could assume great importance in this context.
- Migrant pupils also could face hostility from peers, on the grounds of their status as newcomers or ‘immigrants’. A thick skin and the social resources to deal with abuse and incitement was often crucial, but tended to place such pupils at the centre of conflict, heightening their visibility in the classroom.

About the study

The ‘Pupils at risk of school exclusion’ project was developed by researchers at London South Bank University in order to find out more about the lives and experiences of pupils who have problems in school. The project was conducted over a period of 3 and a half years and information has been collected using classroom observations, group work activity and interviews. The researchers worked with 103 participants, including mainstream and behaviour support staff, pupils and their parents.

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For further information

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