EDUCATION AT THE MARGINS: OUTSIDERS AND THE MAINSTREAM

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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The notion of the local comprehensive school, both primary and secondary, which reflects and supports its local community, is seductive and resonates well with the current political agenda on social inclusion. However, a careful examination of Scottish society reveals a lack of cohesion, as indeed might be expected in any community of diverse groups and individuals. How are different aspirations, rights and needs of different people to be met within the local school today? The contradictions engendered by conflicting educational legislation and policy directives expose significant institutional exclusion within the school education system. This chapter identifies some of the limitations operating within the present local comprehensive school, examines the processes by which certain groups of pupils become marginalised and excluded and describes some of the strategies for creating a more inclusive school system.

The new Scottish Parliament has given a clear indication that it intends to create a more socially just society. A raft of policy and legislative documents impacting on state schools reinforces the government's intention to place schools at the centre of the drive for social inclusion. These tacitly acknowledge that the secondary comprehensive school, as presently constructed, is falling short of the ideal that all pupils have quality of opportunity to achieve academically. This inevitably raises questions about the role of schools and the staff in them, concerns that are reflected in the national debate on education, launched in 2002.

Scotland's publicly funded schools educate a diverse pupil population that in September 2000 was officially estimated as 75,221. This figure does not include children and young people educated in 'outwith school' settings, which at any point during the school year 2000-1 was officially estimated as 2,104 (http://ww.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00135-00.asp). Acknowledging pupil diversity demands changes to accepted routines and practices and challenges the belief that schools are 'good places' and that all pupils should be in them. 'Different' is

construed as 'difficult'; the 'lippy', the 'late' and the 'lackadaisical' pupils are often subject to various forms of exclusion. Rejection of such pupils is not solely by school staff. Schools operate within an extended social context, a fact often forgotten by those who simplistically blame teaching staff. In many cases, the wider school community initiates some forms of exclusion.

Much recent research has targeted certain groups of 'failing' or under-achieving pupils and this has led to a greater recognition of the complexity of factors involved, such as general ethnicity and different life chances. But a persistent lack of empathy with the values and behaviours of some individuals and social groups, together with the belief that they cause their own educational failure and social exclusion, continues. Conversely, families and communities can have negative perceptions of schools; their lack of previous positive experiences have long-term effects on successive generations, whose aspirations and expectations of being valued by schools are low. The different discourse of schools and their implicit rules of engagement can lead to misunderstandings and pupils believing that they have been treated unfairly. Such miscommunication contributes to confrontational behaviours in class, with minority ethnic groups, in particular, being more at risk.

As an example, Scottish research into Gypsies and Travellers, some of whom claim ethnic status, shows their continuing marginalisation, particularly 'in secondary schools (Lloyd et al., 1999). These communities have their historical and cultural roots in mobile life styles, but self-identify in different ways; as Gypsy/Travellers, as Occupational Travellers and as New (Age) Travellers (see http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/step/index.html). As yet, there are no published statistics on the numbers of Gypsy and Traveller pupils in Scottish schools. However, in 2002, additional categories relating to Gypsies and Travellers were included within the annual school census forms. These returns, completed by schools, can only provide an indication of the numbers of self-identifying Gypsies and Travellers actually attending schools. They provide no indication of the numbers who do not enrol or who have 'dropped out' of schools. Research in Scotland into Gypsies and Travellers' experiences in accessing and engaging with schools has revealed complex patterns of attendance and very high levels of non-attendance. These experiences are not unique to them; there are others who experience interrupted learning (Jordan, 2001a).

INTERRUPTED LEARNING

A key feature of Gypsies and Travellers that causes concern for schools is their mobility; particularly their unpredictable enrolments and departures, together with frequent absences (Jordan, E., *Traveller Pupils and Scottish Schools, Spotlight 76*, SCRE, 2000). These impact on the smooth running of the school, particularly in the organisation of classes, teaching groups, forward plans and allocation of learning support. Their attendance and attainment levels are relatively low. This pattern can also be seen in homeless families, those in women's refuge facilities, children whose care is shared within extended family arrangements due to parental divorce and remarriage, and, to a lesser extent, within 'looked after' children, 'school phobics' and pregnant schoolgirls (Borland et al., 1998). All share the experience of interruptions to the continuity in and coherence of their school learning.

A new term, 'interrupted learners', has entered the educational lexicon as yet another group of vulnerable learners in schools is identified and labelled. However, within this group there is seen to be an implicit subdivision, the 'deserving' (it is not their fault) and the 'non-deserving' (they bring it on themselves). Such subjective interpretations of absence and a focus on the learner, rather than the institution, influence the responses made within schools and authorities. Support for learning during periods of absence has generally been arranged on a 'grace and favour' basis. Some groups with patterns of disrupted attendance are viewed relatively sympathetically, such as those with chronic illnesses, young carers, travelling showground families and minority ethnic families making extended visits abroad to maintain cultural links and family relationships. They are regarded as members of the school community who will return; books and other resources can be loaned out with an expectation that they will be used and brought back. For those whose attendance is less predictable, there is rarely any continuity in support.

Pupils experiencing interrupted learning have other less obvious problems to contend with. All will have experienced a loss of peer groups and friends, and will have to negotiate entry into an already established set on each return or new enrolment. This process becomes more fraught with age and frequency of moves/interruptions. While teachers normally introduce new pupils and delegate others to support them, there are regular reports of name-calling, bullying and racism in the playground and on the

journeys to and from school, especially on the school bus. Few such incidents are taken seriously and parents are often unaware of formal procedures for making complaints.

When pupils move across authority boundaries, some become non-pupils as no-one officially takes direct responsibility for their education, other than their parents who themselves often have more pressing priorities to deal with. A homeless family, for example, may be engaged in a constant search for somewhere to sleep; with no fixed address, enrolment in a school is not only problematic, but also a potentially embarrassing and diminishing experience. As a result, many 'interrupted learners' vote with their feet, and 'drop out' of school (Dobson et al., 2000). Families often give tacit support to their youngster's decision to self-exclude. Such laissez-faire parental attitudes are then identified by schools as the cause of the pupil's behaviour, rather than as a response to deficits within the school system.

SELF-EXCLUSION

In Scotland, a greater awareness of parental rights and responsibilities in relation to children's education has led to increasing use of alternatives to school education, which raises questions about the rights of children within society. Self-exclusion from publicly funded comprehensive schooling, for example, is reflected in an upsurge in the numbers of children whose parents have chosen to 'home educate', officially recorded as 349 in 2002 (http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00135-00.asp), but possibly as many as 5,000. Parents make this choice for a range of reasons, which implicitly, if not explicitly, rejects the learning and teaching experiences that schools are currently able to provide for children organised in groups of thirty, by age and by stage. Home educators argue that home education is unconstrained by the demands of a school's timetabled curriculum, that their child's learning is positively shaped by their ability to provide individualised teaching that is directly responsive to their child's learning needs (see, http://www.education-otherwise.org). Nevertheless, home education often provokes negative responses from those in state education. Bias against home education has clear resonance with that expressed about the use of private schools. In the case of minority ethnic and religious families, opting out of state schools arguably preserves cherished values and beliefs. However, these forms of self-exclusion can be viewed by critics as socially divisive and as contributing towards racism and

sectarianism. The same critics are likely to see opting out as a rejection of social inclusion.

For children outside the system of public accountability, there are justified concerns about the quality of their academic and social experience, the rights of children to be heard, to be consulted and to have their own peer group. Community and/or peer pressure within some Gypsy/Traveller communities does lead to very high levels of rejection of secondary schools, with many not having the opportunity even to enrol at the transfer stage, despite successful experiences at the primary school. Yet, it can be argued that the option of home education supports diversity in cultural values and, in particular, the role of the family and the home. For some Gypsy/Travellers communities, home education is of paramount importance, particularly at the onset of puberty. Young Gypsy/Travellers are inducted into the families' work and value codes, and ethnic and cultural boundaries are maintained. The next generation is nurtured and prepared to take on its duties and responsibilities to the extended family. Schools report on their very positive strengths: adaptability, entrepreneurship, creativity, resilience, social cohesiveness and mutual responsibility. But there are also families where youngsters remain non-literate and lack the knowledge to gain access to opportunities others take for granted (Jordan, 2001b). This situation has been found in some 'young carers', the 'homeless' and 'school-age' mothers. Self-exclusion here does lead to marginalisation and disadvantage. Section 14 of the Standards in Scotland's Schools, etc., Act (2000), highlights the right of support for some pupils 'outwith school', that is, those with chronic illnesses, young carers and others with unspecified 'extraordinary circumstances'. It also refers to pupils excluded from schools as requiring similar support.

CREATING GREATER INCLUSION OR SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS?

Some authorities and individual schools are trying to create more flexible responses to support diverse pupil populations. They organise and deliver alternative educational provision in a variety of ways, which reflects a professional shift from a traditional 'special educational needs' approach (distinguishing between pupils according to cognitive, physical and/or psychological difficulties) to an educational services' approach. These services have been described in two ways, firstly in terms of 'places',

to which pupils must go, and secondly in terms of 'outreach teams' of teachers and others, who go to the learners. At least one local authority has joined its education and social work departments under a single director, as advocated in the Kilbrandon Report *(Children and Young Persons in Scotland,* Edinburgh: HMSO, 1995), to achieve a more focused response to high levels of 'dis-advantage', a practice which has since increased. The multi-agency approach has allowed a more flexible and comprehensive response to the complexity of learners' individual situations.

The present authors recently conducted a study of Scottish local authorities' distribution and use of laptop computers as a means of supporting youngsters experiencing interruptions to their education, particularly those in 'outwith school' settings (Padfield and Jordan, 2002). The research aimed to describe the experiences of teachers and pupils with laptops, precisely because the technology has a potential for transcending problems of place and time in accessing curriculum materials. But, in policy and practice, no authority issued laptops to those excluded for disciplinary reasons, or to Gypsy/Traveller pupils; those pupils most distanced from mainstream schools appeared least likely to access laptop technologies. One service, which combined both a places' and teams' approach to education outwith school, supported approximately 100 pupils, yet its staff of over twelve had access to only one laptop. In contrast, another authority provided its teacher of Gypsy/Traveller children with a laptop and portable printer, to facilitate on-site provision for children whose ages ranged from three to sixteen, in numbers that varied dramatically from visit to visit.

Some teachers described laptops as beneficial to their practice. First, because pupils found the materials engaging, and second, because the focus of teaching and learning interaction shifted from pupils and their learning difficulties, to the laptop and its software. Other teachers were less convinced and even fearful of revealing their own technological inadequacies, which led to less than enthusiastic attempts to explore the possibilities offered by the National Grid for Learning and New Opportunities Funding. Overall, these teachers, who supported some of the most marginalised pupils, are effectively cut off from current ICT training and development work.

In the same study, service providers and pupils drew attention to the significance of breakdowns in relationships between pupils and the mainstream schools in their descriptions of alternative educational provisions. Some local authorities, with large

pupil populations from backgrounds of 'complex disadvantage' who reject traditional forms of curriculum as irrelevant to their lives, had developed New Community Schools as a response to 'disadvantage'. Frequent examples of pupils they hoped to attract were pupils excluded for disciplinary reasons and Gypsies and Travellers. Education Centres, Community Education Centres, Youth Care Strategy Centres, and some residential schools were carefully distinguished from the New Community Schools. Several respondents described, placements in these institutions as a process to help youngsters cope with large pupil populations and teachers, in preparation for their return to mainstream schools. Typically, provision began with one-to-one teaching, moving to small groups of six or seven, and included outdoor education and home-link workers or weekly reporting to parents. Of particular relevance for older pupils, considered unlikely to return to mainstream school, provision included work experience, in the hope of pupils establishing positive contacts within the local employment market. This latter approach was reported to show positive results in some authorities. Nevertheless, service providers stressed that pupils' names remained on their last mainstream school's roll for two reasons, to maintain communication links and to remind schools of their responsibilities towards all their pupils.

Authorities also organised specialist staff into designated outreach services, variously administered from psychological services and/or alternative education centres. Teachers went into schools, but also met pupils in a range of places, literally outwith school, which raises issues of trust and safety for both. Although such support was reported by service providers as initiated by the pupils' schools, examples were given of continuing problems in maintaining 'ownership' of, and contact with, outwith school pupils. These were described as 'slipping through the net' or 'getting lost' from the system, thus making it difficult to monitor an individual's progress. Nevertheless, all authorities claimed that pupils received support according to their individual educational needs. In reality, an authority's capacity to provide this was constrained by available support services. One pupil, for example, understood that 'difficulties with the laddies' was the reason for her alternative placement but, ironically, her eight peers were 15- to 16-year-old boys, each with different, but serious, 'social emotional and behavioural difficulties'.

Service providers considered that attainment levels were inadequate as performance indicators for justifying costly intervention work. Some providers expressed reservations about funding targeted services to achieve greater levels of social inclusion, with excluded pupils and Gypsy and Traveller families being frequently mentioned as non-deserving of extra funding. Others, sensitive to Gypsies and Travellers' general difficulties in accessing services, stated a wish to see a designated person as a 'point of contact', responsible for informing families of the range of provision, including education.

The study highlighted the serious difficulties that service providers faced in presenting 'outwith school' pupils for examinations. Nevertheless, examples were given of schools' support for 'their "outwith school" pupils', whose successful presentation and achievement in Standard Grade examinations involved scarce specialist staff in escorting pupils on and off premises, providing cover for invigilation and supervising them during breaks. One boy, excluded by a school that remained as the presenting centre, had prepared for seven Standard Grade examinations, but was not provided with a timetable or information about where the examinations were to take place. The school had simply forgotten to send the information he needed.

One unintended consequence of having designated examination centres was that the successful work of pupils and teachers in alternative settings was not publicly recognised, as examination attainments were absorbed into the presenting schools' statistics. Staff frequently rejected the use of 'attainment' as an appropriate measure of educational outcomes. They and the pupils argued that 'achievement' was better able to accommodate the links between personal and formal progress. Demonstration of achievement (successful interventions) was illustrated through individual accounts; for example, a pupil, initially described as 'out of control' and not able to achieve formal objectives, after intervention work achieved four modules in an accredited course.

In conclusion, the most marginalised pupils are still at risk of social exclusion despite significant attempts to meet their needs more effectively. Exclusionary processes within school systems, including the fragmented character of support projects, reveal that an integrated approach has not generally been achieved. Whilst national guidance documents advocate 'joined up approaches', their focus continues to be on discrete

groups supported by central funding mechanisms that produce piecemeal developments.

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