

Applying an ecological perspective to variations in school exclusion levels

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The focus of this research was to further understanding of the reasons for variations in school exclusion rates within secondary schools in one Local Authority (LA). The practice of school exclusion is used widely but unevenly, giving cause for concern to both policy makers and educationalists. The far-reaching effects of exclusion from school are well-documented, significantly reducing the well-being and aspirations of the young people involved.

The research was structured using an ecosystemic framework (Fig. 1) based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original model, but adapted to take into account the complexity of factors impacting on behaviour in schools. In the adapted model, the individual attributes of the gender, ethnicity and age of the child are placed at the heart of the framework. Following Bronfenbrenner's original framework, the face-to-face relationships directly influencing the child are located in the microsystem, these being home, community and neighbourhood relationships. This is followed by the mesosystem in which the interconnections between the child's face-to-face relationships are placed including home/school and staff communication and communication between outside agencies, school and home. Beyond the mesosystem are the social structures impacting on the microsystem and mesosystem: the exosystem. It is here that the school structures that impact on the behaviour of the child are positioned, namely organisation, policy and ethos. Finally, the outer layer comprises the macrosystem, where the political, social and cultural attitudes, and government initiatives and legislation that impact on structures and individual behaviours both within and outside the school are positioned.



Fig. 1: An ecosystemic framework for school exclusion

The ecosystemic framework is a dynamic tool for an approach to analysing the factors relating to school exclusions and as such the layers are not discrete or static but rather are interwoven as interactions take place. The bi-directional nature of influences between the layers are indicated by placing arrows across the boundaries of the systems.

The research used a mixed methodology to focus on variations in the occurrence of fixed-term exclusions. Three research questions were framed to facilitate this investigation, the first being: What is the variation in exclusion rates in secondary schools in one Local Authority? In order to answer this question I used LA historical data on school exclusions for 2004/5 and 2005/6 that included a detailed record of each instance of exclusion at every school in the LA. The information recorded included the age, gender and SEN status of each excluded child; the trigger for the exclusion; and the date of, and the duration of, each exclusion. Also included was the child's identification number from which I was able to determine the number of exclusions each child was given in each period. This data was organised using descriptive statistical analysis through which three schools with high, medium and low rates of exclusion were identified for further study.

The second question: What are the factors leading to the variations in exclusion rates between secondary schools in one Local Authority? was addressed by interviewing a cross-section of stakeholders, these were three school staff, six pupils including four at risk of exclusion, and a parent from each school. My concern was to authentic views of respondents while avoiding influencing their responses. To achieve this I used Tomlinson's (1989) hierarchical focusing technique. The technique aims to draw out the respondent's interpretations and understandings through open-ended questioning and minimal interviewer interventions. This involved setting up a hierarchical map from the more general to the more specific aspects of the topic, so that the interview can commence with the posing of a global or minimally-framed question. The respondent was invited to develop their responses in their own terms, which could in principle lead them to covering the whole of the researcher's agenda. In the case of pupil interviews the process was initiated with an adaptation of Wearmouth's (2004) 'Talking Stones' technique in order to redress the perceived imbalance of power in a child/adult interaction. The respondents were invited to choose a stone representing them at school, which gave them a degree of control of the interview process and provided the opportunities to probe responses and develop themes introduced by the pupils, reflecting their own terminology.

Data from the interviews was analysed using Smith and Osborn's (2008) interpretative phenomenological approach involving immersion in the data followed by coding and clustering the responses into themes identified in the ecosystemic framework (Fig. 1).

To address the third question: What are the implications of the research for processes and systems? I drew together the quantitative data from the school records and the predominantly qualitative data from the interviews.

The ecosystemic approach to school exclusion reveals how a complex series of factors, from both outside and within school, impact on variations in school exclusion rate. Findings indicate that variations in rates of exclusion in schools cannot be tied to a single factor but are a reflection of a complex dynamic. At macrosystem level the role of government initiatives, legislation and individual LAs in providing equitable education for all children is called into question. Although school intake has a significant impact on variations in exclusion rate it is also the individual school ethos, influenced by cultural attitudes in the macrosystem, that lead to variations in provisions at exosystem level. School ethos also impacts on the quality of relationships in the mesosystem level influencing staff and home/school communication, and at microsystem level where staff responses are instrumental in preventing or escalating conflict leading to exclusions.

In conclusion there are multiple drivers to variations in rates of exclusion in schools. Within the context of an ecological analysis of the issues there is a complex dynamic involving both inequities in a post-welfare society and individual attitudes, shaped by the cultural climate and the personal beliefs of those involved in the process.

References

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