

REVIEW: ALTERNATIVES TO EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL

Gordon Lawrie

Pamela Munn, Gwynedd Lloyd and Mairi Ann Cullen (2000), **Alternatives to Exclusion from School**, London: Paul Chapman Publishing, pb, £15.99, ISBN 1853964573, pp.178 + xiii.

Without question the exclusion of any pupil (of whatever age) from school is a statement of failure. Successive education acts have impressed upon local authorities, and by implication the mainstream schools which they manage, their legal responsibility to provide a meaningful education for all. Indeed, the comprehensive system has an even more compelling moral imperative, in that its very *raison d'être* is to provide inclusive - and non-selective - provision. And yet schools find it necessary to exclude their most difficult pupils for varying lengths of time, usually with the full consent of the local authorities. It is often difficult to assess how widespread exclusion is - although schools are officially required to record exclusion, schools will often attempt to 'defuse' a situation by sending a child home for the remainder of a day with a request that they return first thing the next day with their parents. It is doubtful that all schools log these events as 'exclusions' - in fact some will see this as a way of avoiding the need for exclusion.

Early on in **Alternatives to Exclusion from School**, its authors, Pamela Munn, Gwynedd Lloyd and Mairi Ann Cullen, set the tone of the whole book as they recount the feelings and experiences of eleven excluded pupils and their parents. In doing so they draw heavily on some 1996 research for the Scottish Office, in which they effectively treat the excluded pupils and their parents as a focus group, and in doing so succeed in shedding considerable light on the wider effects of school exclusion. Correctly, the authors draw attention to the stigmatisation of parents and other relatives as a damaging effect; to the assorted difficulties excluded pupils experience not only while

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Review: Alternatives to Exclusion from School?

out of school but also on their return; and to the apparently varying approaches of different schools. It is a comprehensive study, with many references to other important literature. It tries to be balanced as well as positive - this is no catalogue of criticism of teachers and the education system. Beyond doubt, the authors have put together an excellent volume, one which should become essential reading for students of education, especially those at the start of their careers. Incidentally, not only is the book concise; unusually for a jointly-authored book it is also hard to see the joins; it really does read well.

But books like these need to come with a health warning. The central hypothesis of **Alternatives to Exclusion from School** is that exclusion is never the best educational option available. We are left without a really clear picture of the 'offences' committed by the excluded pupils so that we as readers can make our judgements as to the suitability or otherwise of the response. In Chapter Two we are told that 'fighting' is the commonest reason for exclusion, although whether this is the case both in primary and secondary schools is uncertain. The authors make recommendations as to how to create an improved ethos in which such behaviour may occur less frequently, but rather avoid any comment as to whether exclusion is appropriate once such behaviour has occurred. Equally, the authors identify a range of strategies to cope with children on the verge of exclusion (some of which are extremely expensive by the way) but are less clear as to what types of behaviour - and with what frequency - should qualify for these special strategies. In Chapter Two the authors also note that teachers are often seen as inconsistent and resented accordingly; yet in Chapter Five a flexible approach is apparently advocated. Practitioners will also note other inconsistencies - for instance that excluded pupils frequently feel a sense of injustice because their side of the argument is not heard. Interviewing eleven excluded pupils, it cannot have been hard to find one or two who felt unfairly treated and 'picked upon'. However, in this book the teachers in whose classes they were unable to cope are themselves given little voice.

Nor indeed are the voices of the other pupils in the school, or their parents. Some day, somebody will do a full study of the effects of exclusion, including a study of the effects of exclusion on those pupils who are not excluded. For exclusion is a two-way process; it deprives challenging pupils of school education, but also separates challenging pupils from their less challenging peers. The positive and negative aspects of this side of the equation need to be reviewed as well. Pupils with challenging behaviour are not the only ones with special needs in schools. Even using narrow definitions there are the physically disabled, those with learning disabilities

and even the very timid and shy, all of whom may need special provision within mainstream education.

This cuts deep to the very core purpose of education, which is to socialise our children to take their place as useful and fulfilled members of society. Many years ago Erving Goffman - the most famous of all writers on asylums - observed that our society has chosen to do this by creating institutions in which we expect the inmates to conform to agreed norms. That some individuals do not conform is hardly unique to the school environment, or else we would have no need of prisons or psychiatric hospitals. Thus we have to recognise the importance of exclusion precisely because it is a means of removing pupils from their mainstream society.

Traditionally, prisons have multiple aims of course: to protect society, to act as a deterrent and to rehabilitate. School exclusion has these same aims. Exclusion from school may not rehabilitate a pupil, although this can happen by moving to another mainstream school with a fresh start. But excluding antisocial pupils may also be desirable to protect the rest from their influence, and it also has a measurable deterrent effect on others in schools. The authors may be right to suggest that exclusion fails in most of its aims in relation to the excluded pupils themselves, but any benefits which accrue to the rest of school society can and should be set against the problems. Only when this balance sheet has been completed - and it may still suggest that exclusion is not worth it - will it be possible to make a proper judgement on exclusion and its various alternatives. Pamela Munn, Gwynedd Lloyd and Mairi Ann Cullen have another volume to write on this subject. On the evidence of 'volume one', it would make good reading.

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