



**Emotional and  
Behavioural Difficulties**

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SAGE Publications

London, Thousand Oaks, CA

and New Delhi

vol. 8(2) 108–119: 032470

1363-2752 (200305)8:2

# Parents' reflections on their children being excluded

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**ABSTRACT** The human cost of exclusion is not confined to the student. Parents of excluded students feel they are judged as unworthy parents and are mere observers to a decision that has radical implications for their son's/daughter's future education. As partners in the educational enterprise of their child, they are often powerless in the exclusion process and are voiceless in the discourse that surrounds the decision to exclude as well as the decisions regarding future education options. The parents' experience of exclusion is a side of the exclusion story that is not often heard. This article describes how a group of parents experienced their son's/daughter's mainstream schooling and exclusion from a mainstream secondary school. The parents' story is passionate, painful and poignant. It highlights the need for the continued development of inclusive practices in mainstream schools.

**KEYWORDS**

*disaffection;  
exclusion;  
inclusion;  
special  
education needs*

Much discussion on the subject of exclusion in mainstream schools has centred almost entirely on the excluding school and/or the excluded student. However, the ramifications of exclusion extend well beyond the immediate experience and background of the student being excluded.

Recent publications on exclusion have focused rather on students' perceptions and their understanding of the behaviours that led them to be excluded (Kinder et al., 1997; Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 1997; 2000; Wise and Upton, 1998). There are, nevertheless, still further factors left to be explored. In particular, the experience of the parents, as integral partners in the exclusion process, is of vital importance. Yet the parents' story is one side of the exclusion story that is not often told or heard.

As part of a doctoral research programme involving an inner city Key Stage 4 pupil referral unit (PRU), a group of parents were given the opportunity to tell their story of how they experienced their son's/daughter's mainstream schooling and exclusion from a mainstream secondary school. The parents' story is passionate, painful and poignant. This article, in discussing the parents' experiences, will:

- outline the context in which the parents' story was told
- explain the research method employed in the study
- discuss how the parents experienced their son's/daughter's mainstream schooling as well as their experience of their child being excluded
- explore some of the implications for the development of inclusive practices in mainstream schools.

### **The context in which the parents' story was told**

The parents' story was part of a study that was conducted by the first author whilst working as a teacher in a PRU. The aim of the research overall was to identify and describe what students, staff, parents and helping agency workers value in a Key Stage 4 PRU. A goal of the research was to generate concepts that could help educators to improve the educational provision for disaffected students or students with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (EBD).

### **Research method employed in the study**

The study was a qualitative case study. The preferred lens through which to view the complexity of the PRU was developed using the ideas and concepts of Michel Foucault. Foucault's construct of 'eventalization' fits naturally into the broad epistemological paradigm of qualitative research, focusing as it does on the particular, the ideographic, with the hope that this narrow focus will ultimately help illuminate the larger scene.

It is necessary to briefly explain Foucault's construct of eventalization and how the study's approach comprised eventalization. For Foucault (1981) the *event* was seen as a useful focus in the procedure of analysis. Foucault uses eventalization to gain a multifaceted perspective on the object of his analysis. Eventalization analyses an event according to the multiple processes that constitute the event, allowing a single event to be viewed from many angles in order to gain a better understanding. However, the many sides to the event are not necessarily made clear when the analysis begins. The richness of understanding unfolds as the analysis progresses. Foucault states the importance of this multiple view in aiding understanding when referring to the construction of a *polyhedron of intelligibility* around the single event:

Eventalization thus works by constructing around the singular event analysed a process 'polygon' or rather 'polyhedron' of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never be taken as finite. One has to proceed by progressive, necessarily incomplete saturation. (1981, p. 6)

More importantly, eventalization offered a strong supporting procedure for

accessing a wide range of people's experiences. Therefore, eventalization, as a procedure, was applied to the study of a PRU. There was more than one 'intelligibility' involved in the daily experience of the PRU. The 'polyhedron of intelligibility' of this particular place incorporated not only the students and staff but also the parents and outside agencies involved in the unit. Surveying these different intelligibilities helped to enrich the picture of what is valuable in a PRU (McDonald, 2001). The casting of a broad net around the PRU enabled an analysis of the multiple processes of the PRU. In casting this broad net it was possible to take advantage of the opportunity to hear the parents' 'intelligibility' of their experiences.

The study employed a qualitative methodology with interviews as the data collecting method. The study deliberately sought out a range of people involved in the PRU. The total number of people involved in the study was 26. This included 10 students (seven male and three female), eight parents, three staff (two teachers and one learning support assistant), an educational psychologist, a residential social worker, an educational social worker, a youth offending team member, and a social worker.

The interview itself was iterative and evolved over the course of the study. The style of the interview was an informant type of interviewing as referred to by Powney and Watts (1987). This style of interviewing allows the interviewees freedom to respond and give information as they see appropriate rather than being expected to respond less freely to rigid preset questions by the interviewer. In this sense the interview is what Kvale (1996) refers to as 'an *inter view* [sic], an interchange of views between two persons about a theme of mutual interest'. Interviews were conducted in the parents' home and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. NUD.IST 4, a qualitative computer software program, was utilized in assisting with coding and categorizing.

## **The parents' experiences of their child's exclusion and referral to a PRU**

### **Practices in mainstream schools**

As an introduction to the interviews the parents were asked to describe their son's or daughter's schooling history. This information helped to set the scene of the students' educational journeys before they entered the PRU and to clarify whether the parents thought that the PRU had any effect on their sons or daughters. Inextricably linked in the students' schooling history is the parents' experience of their sons or daughters being excluded from school. The parents' anger from the experience and sense of powerlessness when confronted by the machinations of the education system are clearly voiced in the interviews. The main study did not focus on exclusion and

the interviews did not dwell on this topic. However, the powerful experiences described by the parents offer a picture of a group of parents clearly traumatized by the experience of their children's exclusion. It is the story of these experiences that this article addresses.

The parents' stories highlight the lack of rights that they have. The parents are at the mercy of governors, in the guise of an exclusion panel, to decide the rights of their child's education with no input from them and no obvious time frame of decision making. The parents' stories bring into sharp focus the need for a change in the mainstream schools' 'mindset about behaviour which detracts attention from what the school can do to make itself a more humane, inclusive place' (Thomas and Loxley, 2001). The students' and parents' experience and feelings of exclusion are set against the backdrop of the annual *Report from the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 1999–2000*, which cites the LEA where this study was conducted to be such that 'few LEAs match the high quality of provision found in [X County] where the LEA's aims for inclusion were achieved as a result of well-focused central support and a high degree of collaboration between schools and other agencies' (OFSTED, 2001).

The parents' exclusion stories were in two parts. The first part was an explanation of the reason for their son's or daughter's exclusion. The second part described how they experienced and felt whilst the process of exclusion was enacted. Most of the parents interviewed did not consider the reasons given for their son's or daughter's exclusion to be serious, and the parents placed most of the blame at the feet of the school and in particular the teachers. The only difference between these parents' views on their child's exclusion is the level or intensity of the blame attributed to the school or teacher.

### **Reasons for son's/daughter's exclusion**

To better understand the parents' perspective, a sample of their interview references will be presented. These concern first the reasons the parents believe led their sons or daughters to be excluded, and second the parents' experience of their son's or daughter's exclusion. (The names used are fictitious to ensure anonymity.)

**'Petty things that got on their nerves'** Two of the parents interviewed believed that their sons were excluded, and subsequently referred to the PRU, for minor offences that could have been dealt with more effectively by the respective schools. They thought that the reasons their sons were excluded were a culmination of petty misbehaviours that built up over time. One mother recalled that her son did not do anything serious and 'at the end of the day it was petty things that got on their nerves'. The boy's father

believed that 'whenever we got called into the school it was a culmination of many things which in themselves to me seemed very petty'. Another mother also viewed the reasons for her son's exclusion to be minor, and thinks, 'he's never been bad, you know, just silly behaviour, disruptive behaviour'. Three other parents also believed that the reasons for their son's exclusion or referral to the PRU arose from minor incidents.

All the parents attributed at least some of the blame for their child's misbehaviour and exclusion to the school. One parent believed that it was her son's 'mouth' that always got him into trouble: 'He doesn't do anything drastic.' However she was adamant that the way he was treated was grossly unfair and did more harm than good. Her son's first exclusion was for a racial comment made to a student that his mother believed was blown up out of all proportion. The girl involved in the incident was a family friend and has continued to be so despite the way the situation was handled. The boy's mother believes the incident was used as an excuse to get rid of him:

It was a girl he grew up with and I'm still very friendly with her mother. It was all blown up out of proportion. He called a half-caste girl a flat nose and that was classed as an extremely racist remark. Because he'd been in trouble before. They were just looking for an excuse to get rid of Addison.

In Addison's second high school he had a long fixed-term exclusion of about 3 months after he was involved in an incident involving a fellow pupil. His mother believed the incident was a storm in a teacup that was poorly handled by the school:

It was the school that blew it all out of proportion. The girl at the time was 13 going out with a 21-year-old guy and her family were quite happy with that. There wasn't a problem. It was just on a bad day Addison pinched her bum while she was in a bad mood and she reported him, but then straight away afterwards she let it go.

**Attitude of teachers** The mothers of two other students believed that vindictive teachers were a large part of the reason their children were excluded. One mother cited the headteacher at her son's primary school as neglecting him as well as treating him poorly because they came from army barracks: 'the headmistress didn't like him. She made that very clear. She didn't have very much time for all three of my children because they came from, as she classed it, army barracks, which wasn't quite true.' Another mother believed that her son did not stand much of a chance as 'her two eldest went to this school and this woman had an attitude with him straight away'. The mother of one of the girls also strongly believed that the attitude adopted by teachers had a major influence on her daughter's behaviour. The girl's older brother and sister went through the same school and she

believes the teachers picked on her because of them. 'She told me it was the teachers. They didn't like David, they didn't like Samantha. David got kicked out of there and she thought it was a vengeance against her because of the other two.'

One set of parents interviewed also believed that the teachers contributed to their son's behaviour by the way they taught lessons and handled discipline. They, the parents, believed that their son was disrupting lessons because the lesson was not engaging enough and he was bored. The 'complaints from the schools were that Lou was disrupting the rest of the class because the lesson wasn't suiting him'. By their admission he is 'very head-strong. If he sees an opportunity of . . . not abuse . . . if he can take advantage of a teacher, if a teacher is not strong then he will be. He will basically rule.' However both parents believed that the teacher should be able to control the students as it is their job. Lou's father recounted how he 'was bored in some of the classes but the teachers made me sit down and learn, there was no two ways about it. Whereas it seems to me the opinion [now] is to get rid of them.' His son's success at school would have been different 'if the teacher had got a grip of him and said: "Listen boy, this is not a game, sort yourself out."' Lou's parents believed that the education system had 'gone pear shaped' since they were at school when teachers demanded respect and got it. Lou's mother saw how poor teachers were at disciplining Lou from an early age when she was helping the class by reading a story to some of the students and he was playing with his Lego: 'He was throwing it out the window and I thought why isn't he sat on the mat with all the other children listening to the story?'

Another boy's mother did not link his unhappiness or truanting to the teachers in his previous mainstream schools but rather attributed his referral and problems at school to the other students. She firmly believed that it has always been other people who have caused her son to be unhappy and fearful in school. The bullying started because he was not from this county and was 'scum and [should] get back where he came from'. The boy's mother does not know why other people continually pick on him: 'I don't know why they was picking on him.' The same boy was also picked on in the PRU and his mother thought that the teachers did not do enough to protect or represent his views in the conflict. In her eyes the staff took the word of the other boy at her son's expense, 'it was either James or David and David gave way to James. James won again.' She believed that 'the unit [PRU] thought that her son was the problem so he got pushed out'.

**Sense of powerlessness and anger at the exclusion process** Even though the parents attributed different reasons to their child's exclusion or referral to the PRU, a majority of the parents agreed in commenting on their

anger and frustration at the exclusion process. They were angry at the way they were treated by the school as well as the way the present and future education needs of their child were not made clear. They felt that when promises of another education placement were made or a referral to the PRU was mentioned, nothing happened for a long time. Some of the students spent several months at a time out of full-time education with the parents not knowing what to do or whom to approach. One set of parents calculated that their son lost a year of secondary education because the school dragged its feet in organizing meetings and arranging help. Promises of home tuition appeared to vary and did not often eventuate as promised. The parents' strong feelings about how they were treated was fuelled by their belief that the referral or exclusion was possibly not warranted and yet all the responsibility for the incident was placed on the student.

One student's parents were very angry about the way their son's school dealt with his exclusion and about the loss of a year of school due to the school's slow approach. Their son's return to school was contingent on his having a meeting to discuss his return. The boy's parents said, 'We would ring up and ask when's this meeting going to take place? And they'd say: "Well, so and so isn't here, we'll have to move it to next month." And he lost a whole year.' They appeared to be 'really angry'. These parents felt the exclusion meetings were negative experiences, especially for their son. The meetings were not friendly and not geared towards developing any form of an action plan to help the student with his obvious problems. The meetings included a number of people whom the boy's parents had not met before, which did not help to ease them into the meeting. They felt intimidated 'because I had all the Board there, the Council, you know eight to ten people there at some of the meetings; some psychiatrist . . . but again trying to get hold of him was a nightmare'. The student also found the experience difficult with his parents feeling so angry. His mother recalls:

And do you know the thing that really made me very angry was Lee was expected to sit there and listen to all this awful stuff about him. And they seemed to have all the positive stuff when Lee wasn't in the room and when he was in the room all the bad stuff was coming out. And it just knocked his confidence for six, didn't it?

One mother believed that in the meetings with the school about her son's behaviour she was 'made to feel like you're some sort of unfit parent'. She believed that the headteacher of his secondary school would belittle her to the point that she was 'made to feel like you are some sort of unfit person . . . you shouldn't have that child; you should never have had that child. That's how it made me feel.' Her sense of desperation was evident when the home tuition that was organized by the excluding school failed to

eventuate and her son was at home and 'he did nothing'. In her experience 'I don't think they give a shit. From the day he was excluded I never saw anybody from school, I never saw anybody from the education department. It was all left to me to figure out what to do next.' This student's mother was unsure as to the right course of action in getting her son into school and nobody gave her any advice or help:

Never saw nobody. I didn't even know if he would be allowed to go back into school. And how I went about finding out, I hadn't got a clue. I had nothing or nobody. I just waited until the school holidays . . . just before they were about to finish the term, so I had like those three weeks. I got in touch with [the school] straight away because I just didn't know what to do. I thought: what do I do now? You know. Nobody came round, nobody gave me any advice.

A female student's mother felt that the school did not do enough to help her daughter, nor were they very open in their contact with home. The girl's mother told the school at the exclusion meeting that she believed that the teachers did not like her daughter because of her brother and sister, which they denied. What angered the mother was that the school did not contact her when her daughter was having difficulty and truanting from school. She had no contact at all even though the school 'had my work number, they had the home phone number so they knew I would be on either one of them. But no phone calls at all.' When the girl's mother tried to complain and talk to the headteacher she found that 'when you go up there and ask to speak to the headmaster you got the secretary and that's not good enough for me. I need to speak to the headmaster.' Her frustration and sense of helplessness continued when she tried to phone up the school to find out the next move in her daughter's education. The school was less than helpful and responded to her 'phoning up all the time. "We're sorting it out, you need to get in touch with the education department." I said: "No, you kicked her out of school, you get her into school." It's not down to me to do that.'

The mother of one of the boys at the PRU 'hated' the exclusion meetings as she found them embarrassing, and also she believed the school was not always honest and ran the meetings to suit their own end. 'I hated them, every single one of them. They are embarrassing more than anything and also, quite often, you go to those sort of meetings and hear things for the first time. The school weren't always honest.' Her son, Paul, had a few fixed-term exclusions that necessitated meetings that his mother thought exacerbated the problem rather than solved anything for him. She believed the school suspended Paul and then had to let him back in as they found out that he had nothing to do with the original incident. This caused her



son to return to school angry and with an attitude at being treated unfairly. His anger was compounded by the loss of privileges at home:

A couple of times Paul was suspended, twice I think it was, and then reinstated back into school because Paul had actually nothing to do with it. So Paul goes back to school actually angry because now he's upset, been blamed for something and also been grounded here. His bedroom emptied of all the luxuries and so on. That could be quite stressful going to those meetings.

**A silent partner in the discourse of the mainstream school** The parents interviewed in this study had negative experiences of mainstream school. They found the authoritarian nature of the mainstream schools restrictive and prohibitive. Few of their children enjoyed harmonious relations with the teachers, and they found the curriculum difficult to comprehend. In trying to navigate the school system their son/daughter encountered numerous obstacles. The main obstacle for them was behaving appropriately according to the norms of their respective schools. In a system that has an obvious hierarchy of worth based on behaviour and academic ability, these students felt worthless. Being low down in the hierarchy of worth made it more difficult for the student to be heard. The parents believed that their son/daughter had no voice, as they were not listened to. Most of the parents interviewed were adamant that they were not given the chance to voice their concerns. In not being given a voice the students and parents could not influence the dominant discourse of the school and therefore could not effect any change to the power relations within the schooling system.

### **Implications of the parents' story**

The parents' reflections on their son's/daughter's schooling experience and exclusion highlight the gulf some mainstream schools have to traverse to become inclusive and humane sites of education that recognize, respect and empower both students and parents. Some implications of the parents' experience of their son's/daughter's exclusion from mainstream school are explained under the following three headings:

- the need to positively involve parents in the process of exclusion
- the urgent priority of securing future education services
- a dream or vision of what is possible.

### **The need to positively involve parents in the process of exclusion**

Exclusion is a brutal enterprise. Cooper et al. (2000) are rightly concerned over the 'human cost of school exclusion, and a recognition of the urgent

need to reverse this process'. According to parents the present process dehumanizes them and renders them voiceless. It would appear from the parents' stories that the process of exclusion has two consequences. The students are shut out from participating any further in the education activity of the school, and the parents are also excluded from being a part of the school. The parents' exclusion effectively disbars them from entering into dialogue with the school in an attempt to find out the best course of action for their child. Possibly more damaging is the parents' sense of being judged and criticized for their child's actions. It is incredible to think that at a time of turmoil when the parents are vulnerable they should get the message that they are 'unfit parents' or that they are solely to blame for their child's behaviour at school. It is at this vulnerable time that maximum support and understanding should be afforded to the parents.

The parents believed they had no voice in the exclusion process. The silencing of parents enabled the dominant discourse, which is constructed by those higher up the hierarchy and who determine who is heard, to go unchallenged. Giroux accurately observes:

In many cases, schools do not allow students from subordinate groups to authenticate their problems and lived experiences through their own individual and collective voices . . . the dominant school culture generally represents and legitimates the privileged voices of the white and upper classes. (1989, p. 143)

The silencing of the parents (and students) can only contribute to their sense of alienation and isolation from society. As an existing group that is already disadvantaged they find that the experience of a school system that reinforces their disadvantage only assists in 'damaging those on the receiving end, and will reinforce disaffection in those sections of society most affected' (Parsons, 1999).

### **The urgent priority of securing future education services**

Having excluded the student, the school has the responsibility to continue supporting the student's education until he or she enters the premises of the next education service. It is alarming to hear the parents talking about how powerless they felt once their son/daughter was excluded. They felt powerless because the excluding school promised help but did not give the support promised. The parent did not know what to do next or how to access some form of education for their child. The author himself can relate to these stories because of having worked in a PRU; there were many students who came into the PRU that had not been in school for months and in some cases for a year or more.

The parents depict themselves as people who are brutalized and

traumatized by the exclusion process. It would appear an unnecessary trauma to suffer. Open and honest dialogue with the parents, as well as the establishment of structures to support and guide parents as to the options available to them, would not be difficult. Structures already exist for counselling students regarding the post-compulsory school options as well as university, employment and further training information available to school leavers. The excluded student is no less important and, it could be argued, is in more need of support and advice than those students who have successfully navigated the mainstream school experience.

### **A dream or vision of what is possible**

Finally, the parents' stories indicate a vision of what is possible both in the education of disaffected young people and in working with parents. Ernst Bloch (1970) refers to this as the utopian impulse of daydreams:

Dreams come in the day as well as the night. And both kinds of dreaming are motivated by wishes they seek to fulfill. But daydreams differ from night dreams; for daydreaming 'I' persists throughout, consciously, privately, envisaging the circumstances and images of a desired, better life. The content of the daydream is not, like that of the night dream, a journey back into repressed experiences and their association. It is concerned with, as far as possible, an unrestricted journey forward, so that instead of reconstituting that which is no longer conscious, the images of that which is not yet can be fantasized into life and into the world.

The parents' story, like the process of daydreaming, points to new understandings in working with disaffected young people and their parents. The parents have articulated elements of a collective daydream that connotes a vision of education 'which is not yet'. The parents involved in this study are looking for an approach to education that encompasses human relationships that are set in an environment where they have a voice that is respected and legitimate. However, the students' and parents' previous schooling experience would suggest that these elements are, at present, only possible in daydreams.

### **Conclusion**

The parents' stories, as represented above, clearly indicate that the human tragedy of exclusion is not confined to the student. Parents of excluded students feel they are judged as unworthy parents and are mere observers to a decision that has radical implications for their son's/daughter's future education. As partners in the educational enterprise of their child, they are powerless in the exclusion process and are voiceless in the discourse that surrounds the decision to exclude as well as the decisions regarding future education options.

The parents' experience of exclusion is a side of the exclusion story that is not often heard, and it would appear that if it has been heard it has not been understood, nor has it impacted upon the humane work practices of mainstream schools. Mainstream schools need to make their exclusion practices inclusive. This would incorporate involving the parents in a solution-focused manner that had the immediate and future education interests of the child at the forefront of the negotiations. The parents of all students in schools are important partners in the educational enterprise and need to be included rather than, as these parents highlighted, excluded and treated like worthless individuals. The respectful inclusion of the disaffected student's parents would enable schools to further develop an inclusive environment where all key stakeholders are respected, listened to and made to feel worthwhile.

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