



investing in children

# What's wrong with school?

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July 2001

**With thanks to the staff who were involved in facilitating the work at:**

Easington Community School  
Shotton Hall School, Peterlee  
Windlestone Hall School  
Pupil Referral Unit, Ferryhill  
DISC, Gilesgate  
The Learning Support Service, Broomhill Cottages

*The secondary schools attended currently or in the past by these young people  
are:*

Gilesgate Sports College and Sixth Form Centre, Durham City  
Dene Community School of Technology, Peterlee  
Belmont Comprehensive, Durham City  
Easington Community School  
Shotton Hall, Peterlee  
Windlestone Hall  
The Pupil Referral Unit, Ferryhill  
Framwellgate School, Durham City  
Greenfield School Community & Arts College  
Fyndoune Community College  
Seaham School  
Teesdale School, Barnard Castle  
King James I Community College, Bishop Auckland

**In 1999, the Education Department of County Durham established a working group to come up with plans to improve attendance at schools, and to reduce the number of students excluded from school.**

**Early in 2000, Investing in Children agreed to set up a project which would "create opportunities for children and young people to contribute, on their terms, to the debate about school attendance and exclusions". This is the report from this project.**

**This is a qualitative piece of research compiled by over forty young people between the ages of 11 and 18 who are still at, or have recently left, school in County Durham. The research has taken place over the past 10 months and has involved the young researchers talking to young people from 13 schools in County Durham. The young people (researchers and respondents) come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have had both good and bad experiences of school. Some had been excluded from mainstream school and are now in a special unit or school. Others have had experience of temporary exclusion or had spent time in units within a mainstream school. Some had achieved academic success at school and been very happy; others had not. The young people chose a variety of research methods. These included taped interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and individual written accounts. What follows in italics are the young persons' words.**

**The most striking outcome of this research is the consensus reached by the young people involved. Young people have been telling adults the same things about schools for a long time and yet still they feel that no one appears to be listening.**

- *There's no time for anyone to listen*
- *Once you get labelled it's there all the time*
- *There's no privacy*
- *Teachers talk about you in the staff room*
- *Some teachers are stuck in the past.*
- *They don't respect you.*
- *They don't listen to you.*
- *They put you down all the time.*
- *Some teachers are violent.*
- *Some touch you the wrong way.*
- *Some teachers throw things at you.*
- *Some teachers don't care about you.*
- *Some don't understand.*
- *They hold grudges.*
- *They are too strict.*
- *They give you strict punishments.*

**The assumption is often made that it is the young person who is the problem, not the system which adults are expecting them to fit into. If we want to meet the needs of our young people then surely we could design a system that puts their needs at its centre.**

- *Those who are not academically minded are not thought well of by staff. Some children are good at other things like sport or building things. People should try to find out what people are good at and praise them for it, even if they are not good at mental things like English, maths or science.*
- *Some young people get kicked out of school for having a behavioural problem that is not their own fault. But teachers don't see it as that; they just see them as troublemakers.*

**Young people are expected to tolerate behaviour from adults that just would not be tolerated by other adults. Is this really the way we would wish our children to be treated?**

- *I think that you should not be allowed to get shouted at. We are not allowed to shout at them*
- *Teachers threaten you and if you threaten them you get wrong but they don't get wrong and we do*
- *Teachers use their power against you and can be violent*
- *Teachers are under stress but there are a small number who can make your life hell.*

**Young people have to wear what they are told to and to go to the lavatory only with permission. Adults in the workplace would not tolerate the physical conditions that they sometimes have to endure.**

- *We get told off when we wear jewellery but the teachers wear lots of jewellery*
- *The teachers can wear what they like but we can't*
- *I'm unhappy when I need to go to the toilet and the teacher says no. The teachers are allowed to go to the toilet when they need to.*
- *Children's toilets should be cleaned as regularly as staff toilets and should have a teacher passing the toilets every now and then and at break times to prevent bullying and vandalism.*
- *We get wrong for wearing trainers. The teachers wear trainers and they don't get wrong.*

**Many children are very unhappy at school. This cannot be what those involved in the education system would really wish children to feel.**

- *I don't feel clever enough*
- *People skit us because we are in foundation*
- *I hate the group that I'm in*
- *I don't like school because I get bullied sometimes*
- *I don't like this school because people take money off me*
- *I'm given work that I cannot do*
- *Teachers are so nasty every day*
- *Teachers make judgement without knowing the facts*
- *Teachers always think that they're better than you*
- *Teachers always pick on me and tell me off*
- *I always get the blame*
- *I feel a failure*

**The impact of this sense of failure means that some don't come to school at all or fight against a system, which then rejects them.**

- *If young people can't understand the work they are required to do they will sometimes avoid going to school on the day that they have that subject*
- *One of the main reasons children of my age skive is because they haven't done their homework and are worried about getting into trouble*
- *I'm treated differently from other kids*
- *There's too much stress*
- *Teachers hold a grudge against me*
- *The teachers have their own agenda*

- *Some young people are threatened by teachers because of their lack of understanding of their needs. Some find themselves treated differently from other pupils in the class and don't understand the reasons for this.*

**Of course there are other reasons for children staying off school. Many of the reasons young people give would affect many adults put in the same situation.**

- *Most young people asked said that they thought that bullying was the main cause of children staying off school.*
- *People are worried about being bullied on the bus*
- *I've no friend at school*
- *Some people don't have a supportive parent or a parent with a very negative approach to school*
- *Bad teaching practice*
- *Old aged teachers who are bad*
- *School is a chore*
- *My friends are not at school*
- *Stuff happening at home*
- *There's nothing positive at school*
- *Some young people are in with a bad crowd. They don't come to school because they are addicted to drugs and need them all the time. To be able to buy them they steal from shops which are open during school hours*

**Some young people talked about what it was like to be excluded from school and why they thought that it had happened**

- *I was glad*
- *I wasn't bothered*
- *I was upset*
- *Teachers don't care they're just glad to get rid of you*

- *Some teachers just love to get you out*
- *Some teachers complain when you don't go and they chuck you out for very little*
- *I was frightened of the teacher who excluded me*
- *I was scared*
- *I was scared to tell my parents*
- *School sometimes really wants to exclude someone*
- *It's cool*
- *I had arguments with teachers*
- *Some young people get kicked out of school for having a behavioural problem that is not their own fault. But teachers don't see it as that; they just see them as troublemakers.*
- *It's been going on since juniors. Getting kicked out from schools. When I got into the comprehensive my elder brother was there and I just got naughtier. Trying to show off in front of my brother and his mates. I used to be cheeky and swear at the teachers, fight and smoke, abscond, all for nothing, take drugs (cannabis) that was also just to show off in front of my peers. Because of this I was excluded about 15-16 times, watching older people do stuff and copying them, to try to look hard. I was always the odd one out in the class. I couldn't read or write and blamed this on my behaviour so I could get special attention. Even if it was good or bad. I was on report; my friends were always provoking me into being naughty. I thought that I had to be naughty to make people laugh.*  
*I was in French and John and Chris were going to have a fight, they went outside and Chris punched John. The teacher got in the way; I walked around the teacher and beat the living daylight out of Chris. I probably would have got away with it, but I dug myself in a deeper hole by being abusive to the teacher. I got excluded just before the summer holidays and I got told it was permanent. I then received a letter saying that I had to go to school at 10.00am – which I did. I was then told by Ms... that I shouldn't be in school. Mr P...then told me I had a place at another school.*

**This was what young people thought about school exclusion.**

- *Being expelled from school should be the last option if teachers knew how to handle situations at school. Teachers should know what's wrong with a child so that they can help them and prevent them from being expelled.*
- *If a child was to be expelled for a good reason and the school feels that there is no possible way in which they can help a child then he or she should be moved to a school, which would be best for them and would fit their needs.*
- *The new school would have to be able to understand the child and to be able to teach him or her to prevent them from getting moved again. If the child has problems, it might help if the new school that they are going to is trained for teaching difficult children.*
- *A child shouldn't get moved from school to school because they'll make no friends. If they make friends and have to move schools again they would be distorted and upset. Probably because knowing that it will take them a long time to fit into a new school again.*
- *A child should never be kept out of school for longer than a week because everyone has a right to be educated.*
- *If you get kicked out you are losing your education which should not happen if the problem had been dealt with properly. But it is never dealt with properly because other schools sometimes don't want that child after hearing about them from their old school.*

**Many children and young people come to school despite the fact that they have to tolerate all kinds of unpredictable behaviour from staff and pupils and working conditions that do not encourage a culture of learning or a sense of self worth.**

- *Teachers are always stopping the lessons because of other people talking*
- *We get no education. We always get exercises.*
- *Some pupils in class stay silent in fear of what others might say about them*
- *Lessons are too long and not interesting*
- *There's bullying, detention, and being put on report.*
- *Teachers are nosy. There's no privacy*
- *Isolation.*
- *I don't think mainstream school has time for us. I think that we should have more special schools so we can learn our proper mistakes and then we can get back into school and behave better. Also that they have learnt us that we also get praised when we control out temper with the teachers and they are on our side as well so that we can work together and work in a group together with half my school. I think that we should manage like that. We should always have a support teacher. Also let us speak.*
- *The main reason that young people are bullied or get treated differently at school is because they are from a different background to other people. It may be that they are from a naff area or are in care.*
- *Some teachers tend to treat the child differently as well because they are scared of the other children and what might happen to them.*

**Teaching style has a crucial impact on a young person's experience of school. There is a strong agreement amongst young people about teaching styles that put them off school. They give the following examples of teaching styles that make them dread a particular lesson.**

- *Stuck in the past*
- *Doesn't respect you*
- *Doesn't listen*
- *Puts you down all the time*
- *Violent*
- *Teachers who touch you the wrong way*
- *Teachers who throw things at you*
- *Too strict punishments*
- *Doesn't care about you*
- *Doesn't understand*
- *Holds grudges*
- *Too strict*

**Why do we still seem to find it acceptable for our young people to have to tolerate poor teaching style? Unsurprisingly they all respond well to teachers who have the following teaching styles.**

- *Confidence in the subject that they teach*
- *Positive attitude*
- *Nice personality*
- *Show respect to everyone*
- *Give everyone the same attention*
- *Have a laugh*

- *Interested in you*
- *Show initiative*
- *Good listener*
- *Know how to talk to people*
- *Have patience*
- *Understanding*
- *Helpful*
- *Makes lessons fun*
- *Treats you as an equal*
- *Is a friend*
- *Is confidential*
- *Funny*
- *Flexible*
- *Doesn't bring problems to school*

**Young people do believe that school could easily be changed for the better making it accessible for all children. None of their suggestions are revolutionary. Can those who run our schools put these simple changes into operation so that more of our children look forward to going to school each day?**

- *You should be treated with respect*
- *There should be shorter lessons with more short breaks*
- *There should be more flexible rules and a more flexible uniform policy*
- *There should be work that you can do*
- *There should be extra help*
- *There should be more teacher time available*
- *Children's toilets should be cleaned as regularly as staff toilets and should have a teacher passing the toilets every now and then and at break times to prevent bullying and vandalism going on in the toilets*
- *The schoolyard or playground should have more to do for the younger children to prevent them going out of school.*
- *Libraries should have better facilities such as computers with the Internet so that they can find out useful information. There should also be more enjoyable and interesting reading books to encourage children to read more. Young people should be asked what books they like to read.*
- *We should have a pass to avoid lessons where we get into trouble*
- *There should be a separate unit for those at school who create problems*
- *Praise for being good*
- *Time out for kids*
- *Rewards for everyone's good behaviour*
- *A school web site that lists all the homework given so that you can pick up bits that you might have missed. I have a music lesson every Monday and miss my technology homework. At the moment I have to ask friends what the homework is and I don't always get the correct homework.*
- *A supervisor on the school bus*

- *A law enforcing the wearing of seatbelts on buses so that people can't stand up in the bus.*
- *After school clubs where pupils can meet new friends.*
- *Seating arrangements in class, maybe alphabetically, so that sit you next to people that you don't know.*
- *A special beginning of term day where children are put into teams for team building exercises such as, 'How do you cross this river with a plank of wood and two barrels?' for example.*
- *Personal tutorials where informal chat occurs between teachers and pupils and help can be given. Work could be too hard or too easy and these tutorials could address those problems.*
- *Schools must develop no tolerance of bullying zones where they clamp down hard on bullies and don't give them a second chance.*
- *I am sure that I would have been much happier if my classes had been streamed for most lessons.*
- *A personal tutor to deal straightaway with any incident of bullying.*
- *More after school clubs and non-educational activities.*
- *Curriculum flexibility to allow trips out which focus on exploring and expressing young people's own interests rather than learning*
- *Schools should have another council with professional people on it who are involved with children with problems. It may prevent them from getting kicked out.*
- *Some parents complain to schools because their child is getting disrupted in the classrooms and losing out on their education. This is mainly because a child disrupts the class and the teacher is spending more time with them than the other children. It may help if the disruptive child got a pass so that they could leave the classroom anytime that they felt that they could no longer cope without the teacher asking them what is wrong. This would mean that the teacher would have more time for the children who wanted to learn.*
- *Pupils should have access to an independent advocate*

## Conclusion

The bleak picture for some pupils in our schools is described in these pages. They are shouted out regularly. They are prevented from using the lavatory when they need to. They are humiliated in front of their peers. They are frightened to ask for help in class because they will be shouted at for not having listened carefully enough. They are given unrealistic deadlines for homework. They are given homework that they don't understand. They tolerate poor facilities because they are expected to. They are not listened to. They are bullied and they are frightened. They are not treated with respect and they are not listened to. Sometimes they don't have support at home. They have to sit in classes that are disrupted by other pupils. They are labelled and talked about. They are expected to wear a uniform that they didn't choose. They don't understand the work that they are expected to do. They are bored. In some instances, it is amazing that they attend school at all.

Young people aren't unrealistic in their expectations. They have come up with constructive and reasonable suggestions about how we, as adults can make schools into places that children would wish to attend.

Young people realise that the expectation that they should all conform is not realistic. Many suggested a pass out of class for those who were either having difficulties with the work or who were creating disruption.

A separate unit within the school for those who are creating problems for other pupils was suggested by some and is in operation at some schools.

Young people wanted more praise for good behaviour and time given to team building. They wanted personal tutorial time with teachers so that pupils can have time to talk through work and personal issues and to be listened to.

Young people want to have a say. Too often it appears that the welfare of pupils is put second place to the needs of the timetable. This inevitably is going to have a damaging affect on both pupils and staff. Pupils want more time and more help. They would like after school activities and non-educational activities.

They want to have someone to turn to and somewhere to go when things get tough. They want to be treated with respect. They don't want to be labelled. They want to be given work appropriate to their level and they want the quiet and the time in which to complete it. None of these expectations seem unreasonable

