



**The Life Stories of Students Excluded from  
School and their Engagement in Education**

**Report and Recommendations for  
Education Professionals working in  
School and Pupil Referral  
Unit/Alternative Provision**

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## **The Life Stories of Students Excluded from School and their engagement in education: Report and Recommendations for Education Staff working in School and Pupil Referral Units/Alternative Provision**

This report is from a research project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the educational life stories of 15 and 16 year old adolescents excluded from mainstream school and their re-engagement in education. The report summarises findings from interviews with adolescents at a Pupil Referral Unit/Alternative Provision (PRU/AP) and a small scale pilot of a narrative and solution based intervention which aimed to improve student engagement with education.

The first section sets out the rationale for collecting and analysing adolescent students' personal stories, followed by a description of the method used. The interview and pilot findings are then summarised and recommendations are made for schools and PRU/AP. Crucially in order to provide teachers and other education professionals with insight and proposed guidance the report not only highlights what students found to be constructive and problematic in their education lives but also the association between students' understanding of their past experiences and their current approach to education.

### **Why the autobiographical narratives of adolescent students' excluded from school are so important?**

According to government figures there has been an increase in the number of children and adolescents excluded from school and attending PRU/AP from 8,260 in 1999 to 33,110 in 2013 (DfE, 2014; DfES, 2004). So far there has been no systematic analysis or the provision of possible explanations for this fourfold increase in the exclusion of young people from mainstream education. Moreover, there appears to be no investigation to examine the views and opinions of those many young people who have been permanently excluded from school. This is a remarkable omission since adolescents can provide much insight into what needs to change to make the present education system more inclusive and how their own personal circumstances may have contributed to their exclusion.

As will become clear, the purpose of this project is to listen to the personal accounts of adolescents excluded from school for two reasons. The first is to learn from their past experiences of school and identify how secondary school may need to change to be more accommodating of all their pupils. The second, and for this study more important reason, is to see how adolescents can be supported to become re-engaged with education by being helped to make sense of their past experiences and enabling them to start creating a more constructive autobiographical story of their lives at school.

At the age of 15-16 adolescents are more reflective, more self-aware and less impulsive than they were only a few years previously. In addition, by the time children reach mid to late adolescence they have developed the ability to look back, and to varying degrees make sense of their past experiences in relation to themselves. In the other words, they have begun to form an identity which is informed by their memories of home and school. The way in which they remember the past, however, is not an accurate portrayal but a subjective story shaped by their selective memories. In order to make sense of a wide range of different experiences, which are often disconnected from one another, adolescents (and adults) prune their memories to construct a coherent narrative about themselves and the person they think they are or would like to be.

Most importantly, the personal narratives which students have about themselves in relation to education are not inert historical events but recollections that serve to maintain the perceptions they have of themselves. For instance, a student in year 10 who does not consider himself able to learn effectively at school will have a personal backstory populated by events which help to maintain this description of himself. There will be episodes where he could not relate to the work and was bored, did not do the work, did not get on well with teachers, misbehaved and was sent out of class. Yet, there will also have been positive experiences, of when the individual did have constructive relationships with teachers and did learn at school. These memories, however, have become marginalised exceptions pushed aside by the dominant narrative of being misunderstood and unable to learn at school. What this example illustrates is how personal narratives, constructed by the individual, can help to fix and maintain the negative view an adolescent student holds about school and himself as a learner. Therefore helping the young person to create a more positive and helpful backstory may enable him to acquire a more constructive view of himself as a learner. In brief, if an adolescent's views of himself as a student are informed by unhelpful and negative recollections then we may challenge and change this perception of himself by helping him to acquire a different and more constructive story about himself as a learner.

## **Aims**

This project aimed to:

- identify what students have found to be to be obstructive and constructive in their school lives;
- highlight the impact of past events on students' current perception of themselves and their education;
- make recommendations for practice by providing the outline for a Narrative/Solution Focused Intervention.

## **The Project**

This project consisted of two phases. The first, more substantial, phase included narrative interviews with individual students and the second consisted of a pilot intervention to help adolescents become re-engaged with their education.

**Phase 1 (student interviews):** From September 2012 until July 2013 I interviewed thirty-five students in year 10 and 11 (15 and 16 years old) at a PRU/AP in London. All the students had been excluded from secondary school (or given a managed move) because of displaying behavioural difficulties in school. Each interview lasted between 20-45 minutes and 10 students were interviewed on two occasions.

With the support of PRUsAP.org.uk (the organisation for educationalists working in PRU/AP) I held three advisory group meetings with headteachers, senior staff and an academic colleague who had extensive experience of working with adolescents excluded from school. These meeting took place in March, June and July 2014. The purpose of meeting with staff well-versed in working with excluded students was to obtain their views on the findings obtained from the student interviews and to consider how these findings may be useful for future work with students attending Alternative Provision

**Phase 2 (pilot intervention):** In order to explore how narrative work with students may be conducted I also worked with four teachers and one learning mentor in two Pupil Referral Units in London to pilot narrative and solution focused interventions with four individual pupils. The teachers and learning mentors received eight hours of training in how to conduct Narrative and Solution Focused interventions with adolescents in November/ December 2013. Then each teacher/mentor conducted narrative and solution focused interventions with individual pupils from February to June 2014. They met with the individual student about once a fortnight or every three weeks. During the intervention I also held four group meetings with the participants to address challenging issues, share good practice and review progress. At the end of the interventions there was one final group meeting to review and evaluate the interventions with the teachers and learning mentor. I also asked for the students to complete questionnaires before and after the intervention to obtain a further indication of their progress.

### **Characteristics of the students who took part in the interviews**

- 15 girls and 20 boys;
- 14 adolescents aged 15 and 21 adolescents aged 16;
- 9 students lived with both parents, 23 with their mother, two with their grandmother and 1 with her father (74% living with single parent/guardian). In 4 cases the adolescent who lived with their mother also reported having regular weekly contact with their biological father. They considered their father to be very much involved in their upbringing.
- Out of the 35 students who took part 66% (23 students) were from low income families. The national average of children from low income families attending school is 28.2%.
- The sample of 35 students included 19 White-British, 8 Black-British, 2 Asian-British, 3 Asian (Middle-East), 2 Asian/British, and 1 North African student. Two of

the students who took part in the study came to England when they were of primary school age all the other students were born in the United Kingdom.

## **Findings from interviews with young people**

### ***Students' ability to construct a coherent narrative about their lives at school***

Most of the students who took part in the study demonstrated limited expertise in reflecting on their past experiences and therefore found it difficult to create a coherent educational life story. I therefore needed to provide them with substantial support and guidance to enable them to talk about their time at primary and secondary school. In some cases it was apparent that they were reluctant to talk about their education but in most cases they appeared inexperienced in reflecting on what they had done in the past and having to explain themselves to another person. Unless they were prompted and supported, most students only provided short factual narratives which contained limited recollection of emotions or explanations for their behaviours. The observation I made is that most of them did not seem to be experienced in providing more elaborate autobiographical narratives by also talking about their feelings, their thoughts and the possible reasons for their behaviour at the time. Besides describing their response to immediate events they often gave me no further explanation for their actions unless I provided them with further guidance and support (such as asking them what they felt and thought at the time or why their behaviour was so different then to how it is now). In short, they seemed to lack the experience of talking about themselves and to providing an explanation for their actions to someone else.

Narrative research on parent-child interactions suggests that children learn to narrate and to explain themselves in everyday conversations with their parents (for instance see, Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). This line of research, on children and young adolescents, suggests that making sense of past experiences is acquired in the everyday conversations which children have with their parents at home. The indications from this study are that most of the participants did not have extensive experience of having to explain themselves to others and that they therefore still needed considerable adult support to help them reflect more deeply on their actions.

The finding that students have difficulties in constructing a coherent narrative has important connotations for practice. The implications are that interventions should focus on memories which the young person experienced in the recent past before making the connection to their experiences of school in the relatively distant past. The benefit gained from focussing on their current lives at school is that it gives students the opportunity to develop their skills and abilities to engage in more elaborative and insightful narrative reasoning.

### **How helpful do students find it to talk about their past experiences of school**

At the end of each narrative interview participants were asked on how helpful they found it talk about themselves and the experiences they have had. Only about 20% of the students interviewed said that they found it helpful to talk about past events. Most students, said they did not find it particularly helpful to provide their educational life story even though they now perceived themselves to have made progress, especially in their behaviour at school. For them to ruminate on all the difficulties they had was not perceived to be particularly constructive, possibly because it threatened to overshadow the fragile progress they were making. These findings are in line with other narrative research on vulnerable adolescents which did not identify an association between reminiscing about difficult past events and well-being or an increase in pro-social behaviour (McLean, Wood, & Breen, 2013; Sales, Merrill, & Fivush, 2013). The indications are therefore that simply revisiting the past may not be constructive. The implications for practice are that instead of simply recollecting past events, it may be of more substantial benefit to help the student realise the progress they have made since their time at secondary school.

### **From primary, to secondary school, to alternative provision**

Students viewed life in primary school in a much more positive light than their experience of secondary school. They contrasted the child centred and personalised culture of primary school with the institutional and impersonal ethos of secondary school. Not surprisingly, such a negative view of secondary school in comparison to their primary school years was intensified by their exclusion.

Students who recalled episodes of problematic behaviour while at primary school recognised teachers as helpful in addressing their problems in a constructive manner most of the time. Likewise, at the PRU/AP adolescents were appreciative of the staff's efforts at adopting a personal approach which took into account individual differences and circumstances, and contrasted this experience with that of secondary school where institutional sanction, ranging from being put on report, and being given detention, were applied more or less rigorously. Some of the students also recognised how they had not been mature enough to cope with the greater levels of freedom and responsibility afforded to them at secondary school. They liked being more independent but then found it difficult to accept and abide by the school rules and be self-motivated to apply themselves and work hard without the more personalised support they had been receiving at primary school.

### **Difficulties at home and distressing life events**

A sizeable proportion of the students who took part in the study (about 35%) made a direct connection between a troubled family life and problematic behaviour at school. They recalled taking their frustration and anger into school when things started to go wrong at home. Difficulties at home included both long term issues (such as a parent's mental health problems) and life events (such as domestic disputes and parent separation). In most cases domestic disagreements ending in the separation of parents usually occurred while the

students were attending primary school and it is here that students remember some of their most violent outbursts and the beginning of their difficulties at school.

### **Parental and Peer group influence**

Besides those students who specifically highlighted difficulties at home the majority of students did not refer to their parents as having had any negative or positive influence on their education. While in some cases this may have been because they did not want to talk about their parents it was also apparent that parents did not feature substantially in their thinking about themselves and school. Instead, their narratives highlighted the extensive influence of their peers. While at primary school it was the teacher who assumed the mantle of parental authority, school friends and peers came to occupy an influential position in secondary school given the more independent and self-reliant environment fostered by the institution.

While there is an expectation that adolescents increasingly associate with friends, their development as more autonomous individuals still requires attachment to their parents as suggested by a number of studies (Chan & Chan, 2013; Gault-Sherman, 2012; Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010). Young adolescents in particular are still expected to seek the opinions of their parents and to be influenced by their parents' views but this parental authority was not apparent in the participants' recollections. Instead, they were increasingly susceptible to wanting to impress their peers and to become popular by misbehaving at school.

In their narratives, adolescents provided two accounts of peer influence. The first highlighted misbehaviour caused by the desire of in-group inclusion, that is, the wish to be accepted by high status and anti-establishment friends. Girls, more than boys, strived for this type of acceptance with the consequent engagement with more extreme anti-social behaviour. The second typical account, more common among boys, focused on the idea of being able to stand up for themselves by being rude and aggressive in order to maintain their position in what appeared to be an informal hierarchical structure that organised in-group relations. This confirms research on peer influence in early adolescence which shows how status and perceived popularity may be attained by acting tough, and at times coercive and aggressive (Wilson, Karimpour, & Rodkin, 2011). Moreover, the findings from this investigation confirm how in some schools students attain popularity by adopting an anti-establishment stance that opposes institutional rules and values.

### **Findings from the Pilot Interventions**

Taking into consideration the finding that in most cases students do not find it helpful simply to talk about past experiences the pilot interventions consisted of a narrative/solution focused approach, conducted by four teachers and one learning mentor. The aim of these interventions was to improve students' engagement with education by emphasising and reminding them of the progress they were making and helping them to construct a positive

narrative about their education. The outcome from these pilot interventions was mixed in part because the participants included students who were coming to the end of their school career and because life events affected the regular participation of two students.

The pilot interventions provided the following insights:

- The students who participated in the intervention were in year 10 and 11. For some of the year 11 students in particular this form of intervention was too late to make a substantial amount of difference. Although older students are more reflective and able to talk about and reconsider past events more easily, it may be better to work with students in year 9 and beginning of year 10 as they then have more time to change their attitude and approach to learning while still at school;
- That students' attendance and life events (such as recurring difficulties at home, or difficulties with other adolescents) impacted immensely on the progress of the intervention. The progress made was often fragile and therefore susceptible to becoming overwhelmed by critical life event;
- Meetings between the teacher/mentor and the student needed to take place on a predictable and regular basis. Mentors reported how difficult it was to achieve such regular meetings in alternative provision where staff and senior staff in particular, have to respond to unpredictable events.
- To also involve parents in the intervention. The findings from the narrative interviews suggest that there is an absence of the parental voice in excluded students' thoughts about their education. Two of the mentors also reported how in their interventions it would have been constructive to involve parents directly to support the intervention. For instance, in one case the parents seemed to exert substantial influence on the student and it would therefore have been helpful to involve them directly and to align them more closely with the objectives of the intervention.

### **Consultation with the Advisory Group**

A substantial number of issues were discussed at the advisory group meetings with two particularly important observations relevant to how this, and similar interventions are delivered:

**A person centred approach and the transition into post-16 education:** The advisory group highlighted individual difference and that it is therefore necessary to work with students as individuals. Most alternative provision adopts a person centred approach which secondary schools are not able to provide. Most students respond well to this whole person approach, their behaviour improves and they re-engage with education. However, because of the high level of support they often lack the self-organisation and self-motivation to become independent learners who are able to make a successful transition into post-16 education. In addition, the confidence they gained as learners in alternative provision is often fragile so that they may not possess the resilience to manage by themselves in an adult learning environment.



**Parental and Peer Influence:** The extent to which adolescents are influenced by their peers (rather than their parents) was supported by the advisory group. Particularly in early adolescence their peer group becomes central to their lives at school and teachers no longer have an important paternal/maternal role to play. They enjoy socialising with their friends and gain self-esteem from spending time with like-minded friends rather than the work which appears to be of limited relevance to their lives and which they are often not very good at. Then after the first one or two years at secondary school - and when the work becomes much more demanding - it becomes a case of navigating their way through the school day by doing as little work as possible and spending time socialising and messing about with their peers. By this stage, they no longer gain self-esteem from their work in school but from the interactions they have with their peers.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations here are for interventions that teachers or learning mentors may engage in to help individual students become re-engaged in their education and become independent learners. The proposed interventions are rooted in narrative psychological and solution focused methods(Ajmal & Rees, 2001; Durrant, 1995; Milner & Bateman, 2011) .

This approach is based on the following assumptions

- That internalised autobiographical narratives have a strong influence on what we think and do.
- That we can change this personal narrative by helping students identify existing strengths and exceptions in their current life at school and by linking this back to their past experiences of school.
- For teachers/mentors to work in pairs to ensure that they can maintain regular contact with the student and to share ideas and good practice. Working in pairs is especially important when engaging in this new form of intervention.
- That the interventions include parental involvement and support.
- That the teacher/mentors are able to hold fortnightly meetings with the student for one term (10-12 weeks). After the first meeting with parents and the first meeting with the student each follow up meeting should last between 30-45 minutes

Rather than working with year 10 and 11 students I would recommend that the approach is also piloted with younger students in year 8 and 9. The advantage of working with younger adolescents is that there is then more time for independent learning to become established before leaving school.

## Suggested narrative and solution based intervention schedule

Action	Summary
<b>Meeting with parent/s and student</b>	To share with parent/s what the intervention involves and to obtain their support. In addition, it is important to obtain an indication of parents' and the students' general hopes and expectation for the future.
<b>Session1:</b> Setting the Scene and obtaining the student's story of her life at school	<p>Explaining to the student the intervention and what is expected from him/her</p> <p>For the student to provide an autobiographical narrative of her experience of school. This is best done by separating the life story into chapters, for which the students provides a title (e.g. primary school years, before moving house, when I was good at school, the troubled years).</p> <p>After the session the teacher/mentor writes a summary account of the narrative created by the student in which she highlights any positive recollections of school (in most cases this is at primary school, and quite often in Year 7).</p>
<b>Session 2:</b> Talking about what is going well, what the student would like to improve in and what actions s/he can take to bring about an improvement	<p>At the start of the session the teacher/mentor shares the narrative summary with the student and adds any changes the student would like to make</p> <p>Conversation about when the student was doing well at school and enjoyed school (from last session) and what is going well now. Then the focus is on what the student wishes to change the most and how this may be achieved (see Ajmal &amp; Rees, 2001; Milner &amp; Bateman, 2011 for further details). Initially it is often best to focus on those areas of the curriculum which the student is already doing well in. Once the areas which the student would most like to change are agreed upon the teacher/mentor and the student agree on which actions she will take before the next session.</p> <p>After the session parents and the student are sent emails informing and reminding them of the agreed actions. In some cases it is best to send parents a text.</p>
<b>Session 3- 6+</b> Reflecting on current events, reviewing progress and improving or changing the intervention	<p>To talk about what has been happening since the previous session, a week ago. The focus is on helping the student reflect on what has been gone well and what has been problematic in the last few days.</p> <p>This is then followed by reviewing the actions agreed on in the previous session. The session may also include reviewing curriculum work with the student in the subject/s she is hoping to improve in. Here it is important that the student sees herself making progress. Towards the end of the session the agreed upon actions are improved on or changed</p>

	depending on the progress that has been made.  Agreed on actions are sent to the parents and if possible a meeting is also arranged with the parents halfway through the interventions
<b>Final Session:</b> Review of the progress that has been made and bringing the intervention to an end	In the final session the student and teacher/mentor review the life story (created in session 1) with a focus on how things have changed in her life. Her it is important to emphasise how things are different to when she was experiencing difficulties at school. The aim is for the student to come away with a progressive narrative about herself as a learner. .
<b>Meeting with Parents and student</b>	Meeting parents to bring the intervention to an end and to discuss how the progress made can be maintained.

For further details regarding the intervention please visit <https://studentnarratives.wordpress.com/> and download **Fresh Start: Guidance on narrative and solution focused methods to promote engagement in education for students attending Pupil Referral Units/Alternative Provision** and/or contact [shaalan.farouk@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:shaalan.farouk@roehampton.ac.uk).

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