
AN EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVES

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Introduction

Alternative Education Initiatives (AEIs) provide educational provision for excluded pupils and young people out of school for other reasons. There has been little evaluative research on the effectiveness of alternative educational provision at re-engaging disaffected youngsters, and little analysis of the impact of these interventions on young people in terms of educational outcomes and behavioural and attitudinal change.

This research was commissioned by the Home Office and the then DfEE to evaluate provision in six case-study AEIs. The AEIs were selected for case study because they displayed some success at re-engaging young people in the educational process. The study formed part of a wider evaluation of the Home Office's Crime Reduction Programme. The evaluation was carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Key Findings

- A key feature of the AEIs was that they offered educational programmes which allowed young people to experience success. In addition, AEI programmes were sufficiently flexible to accommodate the changing needs and circumstances of the young people attending the projects. All the AEIs focused on establishing relationships which were adult-like and based on respect, features which were often said to be lacking in mainstream educational environments.
- The majority (two-thirds) of young people in the study were male and a third were female. A tenth (10 per cent) of young people were classified as 'looked after' and a large number (69 per cent) were classified by staff as having some kind of special educational need.
- The lack of, and quality of, information received by AEIs when young people were referred to projects was an issue raised by AEI staff. In particular, the historical data received by AEIs relating to young people's attendance and behaviour at school was extremely variable.
- Where data was available, it showed that nearly three-quarters of AEI students had previous attendance problems, with nearly a quarter described as long-term persistent non-attenders, and just under half were believed to have been bullies.
- A further area for concern was the referral of young people with complex needs, such as emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). Concerns were expressed about the lack of staff with specialist skills and/or time to work with such youngsters and young people's need for more specialist provision.
- In terms of educational outcomes, approximately half of all the young people registered at the AEIs during the evaluation were awarded some form of accreditation.
- Young people's discourse also highlighted a change in their attitude as a result of attending the AEI: they were more willing to learn, they were enjoying learning and furthermore, they were considering the inclusion of education in their future progression.

- Over three-quarters of youngsters interviewed reported an improvement in their behaviour as a result of attending the AEI.
- Overall, across the six AEIs, 50 per cent of young people had been recorded on the Police National Computer (PNC) between 1997-2001. However, whilst more offences were recorded during the evaluation period (2000-2001), fewer young people were responsible for these offences.
- Early leavers committed on average 29 per cent more crime than those staying for the full academic year (but early leavers are not significantly more likely to offend).
- Young people with 'undesirable' destinations were 28 per cent more likely to offend, and on average committed 32 per cent more crime than those with 'desirable' destinations.
- Young people's expectations and aspirations appeared to have become more realistic as a result of attending the AEIs. They also showed a more positive attitude to the future in relation to employment, college and training.
- Interviewees considered the quality of relationships between staff and young people as a fundamental aspect to young people's successful re-engagement (both socially and educationally).
- AEI staff recognised the interplay between the social and emotional wellbeing of young people and their educational performance. Programmes were therefore supported by a strong pastoral element. As part of this holistic package AEI staff also established links with families and in some cases, extended their support to the parents of AEI referrals.
- The average cost per young person enrolled at the AEIs was £3,800; this was 165 per cent of the average Age-Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) for the LEAs.
- There was a positive relationship between the average per-person expenditure and the retention rate, when comparing the six AEIs.
- In total, 71 per cent of young people went on to 'desirable' destinations at an average cost of £5,200 (137 per cent) of the average per-person expenditure.
- Short-term funding of AEIs was seen by staff as undermining job security and as having a detrimental impact on staff retention.

Background

The overall aim of the study was to evaluate alternative educational provision for young people permanently excluded from school or who were out of school for other reasons. Research has shown the link between exclusion from school and involvement in offending and other anti-social behaviours. Whilst the government is striving to reduce the number of young people out of school in general, and those excluded from school in particular, the quality and effectiveness of alternative educational provision is of importance, if further social exclusion and a possible drift into crime is to be averted.

Arrangements for alternative educational provision for pupils out of school varies between LEAs. Only about a third of excluded pupils return to mainstream education, the rest receive 'education otherwise'. This can take a number of different forms, pupils may receive education in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), they may receive home tuition, or they may attend alternative educational initiatives (AEIs). This research focuses on the effectiveness of these latter forms of alternative educational provision.

Methodology

The AEI evaluation formed part of the Home Office's Crime Reduction Programme (CRP), with support from the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). The Home Office appointed evaluation teams at both a local and national level. The National Evaluation Team (NET), MHA, developed the framework for the evaluation and in so doing determined what common data needed to be collected across the six AEIs. The collection of the data was carried out by the Local Evaluation Team (LET), NFER. The NET worked through its relationship with the LET who had the closest contact with the AEI projects and who carried forward the fieldwork research and the evaluation. The LET was guided by the NET to ensure the overall integrity of the evaluation.

This was a case-study analysis of six individual AEIs and therefore cannot be considered representative of all AEIs. However, the AEIs selected were broadly representative of other interventions providing alternative education, three of the six were run by the LEA and three were run by voluntary agencies. They had similar kinds of opportunities for learning and constructive leisure that had been evident in interventions studied in previous NFER research looking at successful provision for excluded pupils (Kinder *et al* 2000).

The overall aim of the evaluation of the AEIs was to examine the effectiveness of the intervention programmes. Effectiveness was measured in terms of the AEIs' success in returning pupils to mainstream education, educational attainment, post-16 outcomes and reducing anti-social behaviour including offending.

The AEIs were visited on a number of occasions in order to gain both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data included the gathering of information on young people's attainment, exclusion, bullying, attendance and offending. Offending data was also collected via the administration of a self-report questionnaire with young people attending the projects. Qualitative data was gathered primarily via interviews with young people from each project, their parents/carers, project coordinators, members of AEI staff, and other agencies and organisations working with the young people.

Data was collected on 162 young people who attended the AEIs between September 2000 and July 2001. In total 100 interviews were conducted for the evaluation. This comprised 63 young people, 18 AEI staff, seven parents and 12 other agency representatives. A self-report offending and attitudes questionnaire was completed by 97 young people at the start of the evaluation and by 57 (of the 97) towards the end.

Recommendations

- Staff at the AEIs were concerned by the paucity of information on the youngsters that followed the young people to the provision. Data sharing and monitoring of the termly educational progress of all young people in the LEA including both mainstream and alternative provisions, easily accessible from service to service, might be one way to address this.
- The majority of youngsters who left the AEIs over the course of the year were non-attenders. There is a need to ensure that these students are effectively monitored to ensure that they do not become 'lost' from the educational system. The numbers of young people leaving the projects, whilst not high overall, was still significant.
- Some AEI staff noted the importance of post-programme support. Staff continued to support youngsters on an ad hoc basis after they had finished their time at the projects. They were providing crucial support at times when AEI youngsters might be in danger of becoming 'lost', for example, during the summer holidays between finishing at the project and starting at college. The employment of transitional workers might fulfil this role.
- The research highlighted a wide array of positive outcomes accruing from attendance at an AEI. As such, perhaps greater national acclaim and publicity could be awarded to these successes as evidence of the government's commitment to inclusion.
- Nevertheless, the research does point to continued vulnerability: particularly it seems for a minority of youngsters engaged in offending behaviour (though it is important to emphasise that reducing offending is not a primary aim of AEIs).

- The Police National Computer (PNC) data suggested that more crimes were recorded, albeit by fewer young people, during the year of AEI attendance. While the self-reported offending levels showed an overall reduction, (with variation in the degree to which different offending behaviours declined), about one in eight admitted more offending.
- In addition, staff at AEIs saw some correlation between offending and overall drop-out from the project. Hence, the study questioned the appropriateness of some placements. Greater involvement in AEI programmes by those specialist agencies with a remit to tackle youth crime may be another area to develop.
- Many young people gained an awareness of training opportunities as a result of attending the AEIs. Further efforts to raise awareness of the availability of training opportunities might be beneficial for all young people, including those in school.
- Young people responded well to certain features of the AEIs, in particular the staff approach (based on respect and equivalence); high staff to pupil ratios that allowed for more time and attention; and a less constrained physical environment. These qualities are, to an extent, being replicated in certain current initiatives within mainstream e.g. learning support units, learning mentors and personal advisors. Hence the strategies and approaches of AEI staff perhaps deserve greater recognition for their success in re-engaging young people, and such a higher profile may be a useful training resource for mainstream colleagues.
- The research highlighted a need for specialist training for all staff working with young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties and psychological problems. Linked to this was a recognition of the key role played by support assistants working with young people attending AEIs and the need for specialist training for working with these young people. The opportunity for staff to have access to supervision, counselling and/or support in order to respond to and manage the often complex needs, eg drugs' misuse, violence, pregnancy and homelessness, of the young people attending the AEIs was also noted.
- From a curriculum perspective, the common approach of AEIs was to ensure variety and flexibility, tailoring programmes to the specific needs and interests of their intake. Again, this model is becoming apparent in a mainstream context: recent government proposals have placed a greater emphasis on ensuring educational variety from the age of 14 and the extension of vocational opportunities. 'Parity of esteem' for these latter qualifications continues to be an issue.
- Overall, the key challenge for AEIs remains how to provide an educational programme that often needs to cater for a very diverse clientele. Intakes at AEIs included young people with considerable

learning difficulties, students capable of GCSE attainment and young people with complex social problems, such as drug use and high levels of offending. There is perhaps a question mark over the capacity of a single intervention to cater for such a myriad of needs, and hence specialisation may be an area to explore further.

- Funding levels would appear to be a significant factor in the success of AEIs. Cost effective analysis revealed quite some variation in funding between the six AEIs, with a positive correlation between average per person expenditure and retention rates. Equally, the research found that the young people who left the provision early committed on average 29 per cent more crime than those who stayed until the end of the academic year. Additional resources and a particular policy commitment to retaining young people at AEIs (or a suitable alternative) may thus be required.
- Despite the benefits to be gained from a well-funded provision, in general, AEIs were felt to be under-funded and this may well be corroborated by cost-benefit analysis. The average cost per young person enrolled at the AEIs was £3,800 - 165 per cent of the average AWPU for the LEAs. However, cost-effectiveness analysis further suggested the considerable resource implications of 'desirable destinations' for AEI pupils (i.e. training, attendance at college or employment). Here, the average cost over the six AEIs per desirable destination was £5,200, two and a quarter times the average AWPU and 137 per cent of the average per-person expenditure at the AEIs. Given the incidences of drop-out, undesirable destinations, continued offending and non-achievement identified in the report, further investment would again seem to be required for AEIs to offer a truly comprehensive and effective education programme to all the young people enrolled there.

Reference

Kinder, K., Halsey, K., Kendall, S., Atkinson, M., Moor, H., Wilkin, A., White, R., and Rigby, B. (2000). *Working out well: effective provision for excluded pupils*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

The Full Report

Kendall S., Kinder, K., Halsey, K., Fletcher-Morgan, C., White, R., Brown, C. (2002). *An Evaluation of Alternative Education Initiatives*. London: DfES

Additional information

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