WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION AFFECTING YOUNG CHILDREN?
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Introduction

This talk draws on presentations at the HMT seminar on 21 January, 1998 - Which Children are most at risk of becoming socially excluded? After first considering the term what is meant by social exclusion, I examine five features of the risk factors involved in the social exclusion of young children.

1. The importance of early experience
2. Risk factors identified from research
3. Vulnerable groups
4. Role of early education
5. Policy to reduce risk

Social exclusion

Child development is a holistic process involving interacting influences on the growing child at home and outside. The idea of social exclusion emphasises the obstacles in the way of positive child outcomes especially in education. Removing them requires holistic solutions.

The consequences of failing to find solutions to social exclusion problems early on in life pose increasing problems in adulthood. Modern employment demands ever higher levels of skill. Those without the foundations of educational achievement are increasingly excluded from it. The various outcomes of the social exclusion process include:

- poor acquisition of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy
- poor educational attainment through school
- early leaving from education without qualifications
- early labour market entry problems, including jobs without training
- casual work and unemployment
- teenage pregnancy
- trouble with the police
- alcohol abuse
- criminal convictions
- poor physical and especially mental health
- lack of engagement with the social and political functions of citizenship

1 More detailed evidence on early education and antisocial risk factors is given in my presentation to the seminar - Risk Factors affecting young children: what are the early causes of failure at school and anti-social behaviour?
The social exclusion process starts early and is continuous in the sense that one outcome leads to another. It is also to a degree cyclical, in the sense that its outcomes are mutually reinforcing and may be damaging to achievements earlier in life. For example, adverse experiences and circumstances at a particular stage of childhood may hold back not only back the child educationally relative to peers, but he or she may regress to earlier levels of cognitive achievement.

We are uniquely placed in Britain to understand the social exclusion process because of the large-scale longitudinal datasets which are available to us. These include the three birth cohort studies starting in 1946, 1958 and 1970 respectively, which have followed up individuals from birth to adulthood. From them we can learn what factors early in life increase the risk of social exclusion and those factors which help to resist it.

**Importance of early learning**

Research here and overseas has for a long time established that the early stages of life, even the first year of growth, are of enormous importance in development earlier on. According to a 1994 Carnegie Foundation report, during the first year of life brain development is rapid and extensive and much more vulnerable to environmental influence than previously realised. Early stress has been shown to have a negative impact on brain function. Even at 22 months there is evidence from the 1970 birth cohort study (BCS70) of social gradients in cognitive development. What takes place before school, therefore, is as important, if not more important, as what happens when school begins. An illustration of this effect is shown from the development of literacy and numeracy skills from birth up to adulthood in the 1958 birth cohort study - The National Child Development Study (Figure 1a and 1b)).

(Figures 1a & 1b)

The graph shows the proportion of variation in literacy and numeracy in men in adulthood which can be explained in terms of circumstances and experiences at different ages to which the developing individual is subjected. The graph shows two things:

1. There is a rapid rise in the proportion of variation explained through the pre-school and primary school years, with levelling off from about 11 onwards, and with only small additional amount of variation explained from 16 on. This shows that the key building blocks of school achievements are established early. Similarly their absence lays one of the main foundations for later social exclusion.

2. Although the graph shows a high degree of predictability in educational outcomes from earlier circumstances and experiences - by age 33, 40% of the variation in basic skill can be explained - there is also a lot of unpredictability about them. Some of the unexplained variation is due to the inaccuracy of our measurements of child development. The rest is due to the unpredictable influences which shape individual life patterns - the job you get, who you know and so on. Many people who end up in socially excluded categories do not show these signs and symptoms in childhood. Similarly, many at risk of social exclusion, overcome their difficulties later on.

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2 Reported in the paper by Gillian Pugh (Thomas Coram Foundation), *Children at risk of becoming socially excluded: an introduction to the ‘problem’*, HMT Seminar, 21 January
**Risk factors identified from research**

Reviewing all the predisposing conditions for social exclusion, a common set of features with some variations across particular outcomes can be identified. These are listed in Table 1 under four broad headings: material factors, child factors, family factors and school factors.

**Table 1 Childhood risk factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material factors</th>
<th>Child factors</th>
<th>Family factors</th>
<th>School factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>poor living conditions</td>
<td>low birth weight</td>
<td>low aspirations for child and lack of interest</td>
<td>home-school relations weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>council housing in economically rundown areas</td>
<td>poor visual-motor skills</td>
<td>troubled relationships within family, especially between parents and between parents and children and family break-up</td>
<td>poor leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overcrowding</td>
<td>poor early cognitive development</td>
<td>lack of attachment to adult role models</td>
<td>low teacher commitment to child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free school meals for children</td>
<td>poor grasp of basic skills: reading and number work</td>
<td>lack of social controls</td>
<td>manual working class intake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low family income &lt;£150 per week</td>
<td>temperamental difficulties - hyperactivity, impulsiveness and attention (HAI) disorder</td>
<td>frequent changes of carer and parental absence</td>
<td>council estate intake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>behavioural problems</td>
<td>father long-term unemployed</td>
<td>poor monitoring of children’s progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>poor school attendance</td>
<td>lone parent</td>
<td>inadequate transition from pre-school to primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low self-esteem</td>
<td>parents with alcohol, drug or psychiatric problem</td>
<td>pre-school preparation poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These comprise in summary:

**Material factors**: different forms of poverty and housing stress.

**Child factors**: physical characteristics, poor cognitive development and educational attainment, behaviour problems, difficult temperament.

**Family factors**: parental characteristics, (poor education, low interest in child’s education, low aspirations), lone parent, troubled relationships, family breakdown.

**School factors**: poor catchment area, poor home-school relations, poor monitoring, weak leadership
Vulnerable groups

Individual risk factors do not operate alone but mutually reinforce each other, in some circumstances producing an accumulating set of difficulties as the child gets older. In combination such factors make children particularly vulnerable to social exclusion. Examples are:

- children in certain geographical locations, especially the inner cities, with higher than average concentrations of risk, centred on poor housing, family poverty and low achieving schools
- children growing up in care (of whom 25,000 are under 10)
- children on child protection register (18,000 of whom are under 7).
- children with disabilities (5% of child population)

Area-based versus family-based vulnerability

Although risks are concentrated to a certain extent geographically, particularly in rundown housing estates in the inner city, often accompanied by poor schooling, family and child risk factors are to be found in all parts of the country\(^3\). In the whole country 200,000 (12%) children age 0-7 are to be found in lone parent families with the parent not working and a family income of less than £150 a week. Of these 250,000 are in deprived areas (25% of the children in these areas), but a bigger number, 390,000, are in other areas (9% of all children in other areas). If we add in another factor - living in overcrowded accommodation - then out of the 80,000 total, 30,00 are in deprived areas and 50,000 in other areas. This has important implications for the targeting of policy as considered later.

Table 2 Concentrated versus distributed risks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young children 0-7 household income below £150 a week lone parent not in work</th>
<th>Normal accommodation</th>
<th>Overcrowded accommodation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200,000 in total</td>
<td>12% of all children</td>
<td>80,000 in total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>230,000 in deprived areas</td>
<td>25% of all children in these areas</td>
<td>30,000 in deprived areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>390,000 in other areas</td>
<td>9% of all children in other areas</td>
<td>50,000 in other areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance of early education

Although all the risk factors interact, broadly we can differentiate between those that underpin poor educational attainments, and those concerned more with behaviour problems. The former tend to be routed in material deprivation and poor motivation on the part of children and parents. The latter relate more to relational problems in the home, in which the child’s temperament often plays a part. However, it is rare for children in any of the high risk

\(^3\) Figures from the 1996/97 Survey of English Housing presented by Judith Littlewood (DETR), HMT seminar, 21 January, 1998
categories to demonstrate normal educational progress. The key indicator of difficulties, and therefore proneness to risk of social exclusion, is poor cognitive development early on and low educational performance later.

An analysis from the 1958 and 1970 Birth Cohort Studies has enabled us to track the origins of children’s educational difficulties. Large social gradients are revealed in the early childhood characteristics that are associated with later learning difficulties (Figures 2a and 2b).

(Figures 2a & 2b)

The key characteristics that emerge in the explanation of these skills problems are summarised in Table 3 together with suggested targets for intervention.

### Table 3 Origins and outcomes of adult basic skills difficulties and targets for intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Stage</th>
<th>Critical Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pre-school</td>
<td>unskilled family parents’ education poor no pre-school preparation poor housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mother/father does not read to child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>visual motor skills weak limited vocabulary no words read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pre-school preparation family disadvantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early primary school</td>
<td>visual motor skills weak disadvantaged home background parents’ interest low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>family support absent parents unqualified child in remedial class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weak cognitive skills reading delayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>primary curriculum family disadvantage family literacy home/school relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individual support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>late primary school</td>
<td>poor home-school relations disadvantaged home background parents’ interest low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reading skills weak numeracy skills delayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early secondary school</td>
<td>mathematics poor non-exam stream behavioural problems teacher expectations low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reading skills weak maths skills weak examination prospects poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>secondary curriculum school/class organisation examinations policy home school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
<br>|
|                  | relations student behaviour teacher expectations                                |

Early education difficulties are rooted in adverse circumstances in the home associated with low income, council rented housing, lack of parental interest and aspiration or support at home for early learning and often accompanied by behaviour problems. The measured outcomes are poor cognitive test performances, pre-school and post school right through to school qualifications.

We can conclude that critical elements of pre-school preparation are missing in the case of the children who end up with basic skills problems, especially the constructive play that
underpins the development of the visual-motor skills which then impedes early reading. Without early reading, the development of numeracy is similarly impeded through primary school. Such children then enter secondary school well behind their peers and have great difficulties in ever catching up.

Resilience versus vulnerability

Concentration of risk factors identifies children vulnerable to social exclusion. At the same time, as was pointed out earlier, the fluidity of individual characteristics means that many children at risk of social exclusion end up as successful adults. In one study adults were followed up in the National Child Development Study data, who at age 7 had shown all of the material risk factors, yet at the age of 23 years had relatively high incomes and owned their own homes. The critical factors in these achievements were parents retaining high levels of aspirations and the children encountering teachers who had strong commitment to them. Such teachers worked to keep open the child’s opportunities, rather than label the child as a failure.

Policy conclusions

Policy needs to be framed to address the vicious versus the virtuous cycles in child development (Table 4).

Table 4  Vicious and virtuous circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Downward Cycle</th>
<th>Upward Cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional parent-child interactions under conditions of economic and emotional stress</td>
<td>Positive interacting influences from parents and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern of difficult relationships repeated with teachers.</td>
<td>Parents maintain strong aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations re-cycle the adverse effects of material disadvantage and behaviour difficulties reinforcing the exclusion</td>
<td>Teachers show commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion resisted</td>
<td>Children respond to learning opportunities and support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Central to these cycles is the role of the family, both as the creator of the conditions for later maladjustment, and as the means by which it can be resisted. The great majority of families, whatever the nature of the parents’ own problems provide the protection and the stimulus to positive development that children need. The problem arises when a set of external circumstances combine with a set of adverse family interactions and particular child characteristics to reinforce negative developmental processes rather than inhibit them. In most cases the continuing risk appears to derive less from any irreversible effect in early life, than from continuing disadvantaged circumstances reinforcing and recycling the social relations identified with the risk.

The possibility of reversing such processes with intervention or change of family circumstances is well demonstrated in a wide range of successful pre-school projects. Much
has been learned in this country and overseas about what works in early educational intervention. These were comprehensively reviewed at the previous seminar. The Educational Priority Area Programme that followed the Plowden report, for example, and took place at much the same time as the influential High Scope programme in the USA, identified examples of effective pre-school provision, as have many of the initiatives that followed it. In early primary school such interventions as the Basic Skills Agency’s Family Literacy Programme is a successful means of cementing home/school relations around the shared interest of helping the child learn to read, which also has measurable benefits for the parents.

Policy Options

Two main policy issues need to be addressed

1. Area-based versus family targeting

2. Early versus late intervention

1. Area-based versus family targeting

Holistic policies require holistic solutions through a combination of disciplines and approaches. Economies are gained through targeting geographically where there are high levels of vulnerability, e.g. the run down housing estate. On the other hand, early intervention programmes targeted in this way, such as those introduced in the Post-Plowden Educational Priority area Programme, suffered from the ‘ecological fallacy’. As we have seen, although there are concentrations of difficulties in particular places, there is also a lot of variation within them and in other areas. Many families do not need the targeted provision in high risk areas and many families outside the high risk areas need it a lot. Alongside area-based targeting, universal family and child-based targeting is always going to be necessary.

2. Early versus late intervention

Traditionally pre-school nursery provision has been concerned with child care, whereas primary school has been concerned with learning the basic skills. A staged approach to education would see the early pre-school learning as a vital part of the education process, either taking place in families, where the parents are equipped to provide them, or in nurseries. At primary school itself, good home/school relations are a key factor accompanying the learning that goes on in the classroom itself. Parents need to see themselves as educators playing an integral part in the education process. Where this is not possible, through inadequate facilities or capabilities at home, then additional help is needed for children within school.

Evaluation and monitoring

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4 Paper by Chirstine Oliver, Marjorie Smith and Sandy Barker (Thomas Coram Research Institute, Institute of Education), HMT seminar, 26 February, 1998.
Intervention without evaluation leads to uncertainty about effectiveness. The use of assessment for the formative purpose of monitoring and therefore understanding children’s successes and difficulties in early learning, is an important accompaniment to effective intervention. Ideally this needs to operate in all areas of development, cognitive and also behavioural.

*Never too early and never too late!*

Policy needs to be two pronged

The earlier intervention occurs, first through pre-school provision, then through home/school links, the more opportunity there is to build up a positive set of relationships around developmental processes rather than negative ones, with the consequent reinforcement of positive outcomes.

But it is never too late to intervene. The amount of unexplained variability in educational outcomes suggests that there is a large amount of fluidity in individual life patterns, which means that they can be influenced right through adult life. Targeting therefore needs to occur at every age and at every stage in life but with the targets determined by the research evidence.

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**USEFUL REFERENCES**


Parsons, S. and Bynner, J (in press) *Influences on Adult Basic Skills*. London Basic Skills Agency


Figure 2a  Per cent receiving free-school meals at age 11
Cohort members by literacy and numeracy at 37

Figure 2b  Per cent parental lack of interest as rated by teachers at age 7
Cohort members by literacy and numeracy at 37