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Alternative approaches to school exclusion: Perspectives of headteachers in England.

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Summary

There is little qualitative data exploring effective alternatives to school exclusion in England. This is true across all age groups and school types. This policy brief draws together data from a two-year research commission investigating the impact of school exclusion on children's mental health and well-being in the North East of England by Martin-Denham (2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The research highlighted instances of children held in isolation booths on a daily basis for periods ranging from several months to over three years. Whilst in isolation, the children were not taught, spoken to or allowed to interact with peers; for them isolation became their statutory education, to the detriment of their mental and physical health and academic progress (Martin-Denham, 2020a).

We are beginning to recognise the need for policy that directs schools to become more inclusive of children with special educational needs and disabilities. In contrast, Department for Education Statutory Guidance affords schools the ability to implement systems and processes that allow for the ongoing internal exclusion of children.

This policy brief incorporates the thematic analysis of the views of 46 headteachers as a retrospective sample from the original study. It examines the alternative approaches to school exclusion currently used in schools. The analysis identified three distinct themes: exclusionary systems, processes and practices; limbo; and inclusionary systems, processes and practices. The findings illustrate a broad range of approaches, from draconian to inclusive, used by schools to 'manage' rather than assess and identify underlying needs. It is recommended that through review of DfE Statutory guidance the use of soft wording such as 'should' is removed and replaced with 'must', thus placing a directive on schools to identify, assess, intervene through appropriate and inclusive provision.

The extent of school exclusions in England

The Education Act (1986, c. 61) introduced 'fixed period' and 'permanent' school exclusions, legitimising the removal of a child from school if they were thought to be persistently or severely deviating from the school's behaviour policy, and when allowing them to remain would seriously harm the education or welfare of others (DfE, 2017a).

The DfE (2018) reported a downward trend in school exclusions between 1995-96 and 2011-12, rising again in 2012-13. However, data from 2018-19 revealed only a marginal decrease of 11 permanent exclusions from the previous year, whilst fixed period exclusion rose from 410,000 to 438,300 (DfE, 2020). This dataset revealed that children with special educational needs designated as (SEN) support were five times more likely to be permanently excluded, reducing to 2.5 times when an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was in place.

The research

Following ethical approval, semi-structured 1:1 interviews took place between September 2018 and June 2019, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes. Thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts.

Table 1. Number of schools interviewed out of all schools in Sunderland

Type of School	Number of schools in Sunderland	Number of schools in the study	% of Schools
Mainstream Primary	62	27	44%
Mainstream Secondary	18	10	56%
Special School	7	4	57%
Alternative Provision	6	5	83%
Total	**93**	**46**	49%

(Martin-Denham, 2021c)

Why we should care about school exclusions

Evidence from the UK shows that those excluded from school have an increased risk of poor educational outcomes (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998; Office of the Children's Commissioner 2017, Martin-Denham 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021a) and increased risk of drug misuse (Martin-Denham, 2020d; 2021b). Furthermore, not coping or having needs met in mainstream school can harm mental health and well-being (Martin-Denham 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021a; 2021b).

Findings

Alternative approaches to school exclusion: Views of headteachers (Martin-Denham, 2021c).

Evidence from headteachers suggests that schools' alternative approaches to school exclusion form three distinct categories: exclusionary systems, processes and practices; limbo; and inclusionary systems, processes and practices (Figure 1).

What alternative approaches to school exclusions do headteachers provide in school?

Figure 1. Alternative approaches to school exclusion

Exclusionary practices

Exclusionary approaches as an alternative to school exclusion were mostly disclosed by secondary school headteachers (HTs) through systems, processes and practices of isolation and segregation. Most commonly, isolation booths were used to separate children from the main school population. The headteachers identified this as the most suitable method to punish children who did not conform to the school's behavioural expectations. Interviews indicated that the children are not taught curriculum content but were supervised, completing work set by subject teachers: Denham, 2020d; 2021b). Furthermore, not coping or having needs met in mainstream school can harm mental health and well-being (Martin-Denham 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021a; 2021b).

'We have an inclusion unit, if children are not behaving to the standards we expect. It can be for a few hours, a day or a week depending on the seriousness of what has gone on. It could be a bullying issue or an assault on another pupil or just general misbehaviour. It's a quiet environment. You sit in there, on your own in silence.'

Isolation was described as an opportunity for children to calm down and to provide respite for teachers and other children in the class. Some secondary HTs said isolation booths were not a permanent approach and that children do return to lessons. Other secondary HTs reported the use of report and detentions to discipline children.

'We've obviously got the basic consequences system where you go through report cards. Then we hit serious incidents. We will do isolation with the heads of years first, if it is not extremely violent. But then we've got internal exclusion, which is over the other side of the school. We are trying to cut down on our fixed term exclusions because I think that's what they want; they want a day off school.'

and

'We have a detention system for punctuality, a detention system from the teacher, a subject detention, to leadership detention. At any point we could put them in isolation; isolation is a small boothed room which is not very nice, where they are working quietly with school behavioural managers, some of whom are leaders. They might be in there for the rest of the lesson, the morning, or the day.'

Limbo

Schools holding children in their care without explicitly inclusionary or exclusionary practices are characterised as being in 'limbo'. Alternative provision HTs argue that mainstream schools do not want children with behavioural challenges on their school roll. Overall, very few HTs included identifying causes for an underlying special educational need and/or disability (SEND) as an alternative approach to school exclusion. Children with SEND need early intervention, but school processes mean that only when a child receives frequent sanctions are caregivers informed of behavioural concerns. Some children were perceived by schools as being unable to access a full school day because they were awaiting an EHCP needs assessment or had significant mental health needs. Some primary schools in the study placed children on reduced timetables when they felt full attendance was not realistic due to their support needs:

'We have currently one child on a reduced timetable. They are on the SEN register we are currently applying for an Education Health Care Plan. The reduced timetable is staggered to meet his needs. We talk about the provision of things that he particularly enjoys in the day. It works really well, so when he's thriving, it's not an issue, but looking at the flashpoints that are causing those issues, match the timetable around it.'

and

'We have done, with parental consent, a reduced day. Start at 10 am and go home at 2 pm. Sometimes it's lunchtime that's a problem, so can we have something different happening there.'

While some HTs perceived this approach to be beneficial, others noted that a reduced timetable resulted in the child being socially isolated:

'We have alternative timetables so they could come in on the morning and night-times, which means they are out of the social loop and can get four hours of solid learning.'

Inclusionary practices

Primary and specialist schools frequently adopted what they viewed to be inclusive approaches that had a focus on regulating behaviour to enable the child to participate in school life. Schools took a range of approaches to prevent behaviour escalation, and to support children displaying anxiety or challenging behaviours to become regulated. These included sensory rooms, music rooms, nurture groups, forest school and reflection rooms:

'We've got calm rooms upstairs, three in total. One is a sensory room which we use with students who just need time out to calm down. Then we have a music room, as a bit of therapy during break and lunchtime, they love that. Then we've got spaces at the end of corridors with settees and things.'

HTs valued external support to help children to build relationships, but these services have been affected by funding cuts. External support enabled HTs to understand how to better respond to individual behaviours as they present in children.

Discussion

Practice categorised as 'exclusionary' (using, for example, isolation booths) or 'limbo' (for example, using reduced timetables) fail to serve the child at risk of permanent school exclusion. In fact, successive exclusionary actions have a cumulative effect; with each report, detention and isolation, the risk of school exclusion increases. Moreover, the impact of isolation booths on children's mental and physical health is well-documented (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Osgood et al. 2013; Martin-Denham 2020a) and normalised use has resulted in schools becoming less inclusive (Gazeley 2010; West and Bailey 2013; Gorard 2014; Martin-Denham 2020a). While a reduced timetable may suit children who could not cope with a full day of schooling, it increases the risk of social isolation. Despite the negative effect of these approaches on children, both are enabled by vagueness in DfE guidance.

On exclusionary practice, 'Behaviour and discipline in schools: Advice for headteachers and school staff' (DfE, 2016, p. 12) states that schools 'can adopt a policy which allows disruptive pupils to be placed in an area away from other pupils for a "limited period"'. The term 'limited period' is vague, giving headteachers scope to isolate and exclude children for extended periods on the school site. Martin-Denham (2020a) reported that children had been held in isolation booths for over three years, resulting in statutory education without teaching or participation with adults or peers (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Time children spent in isolation
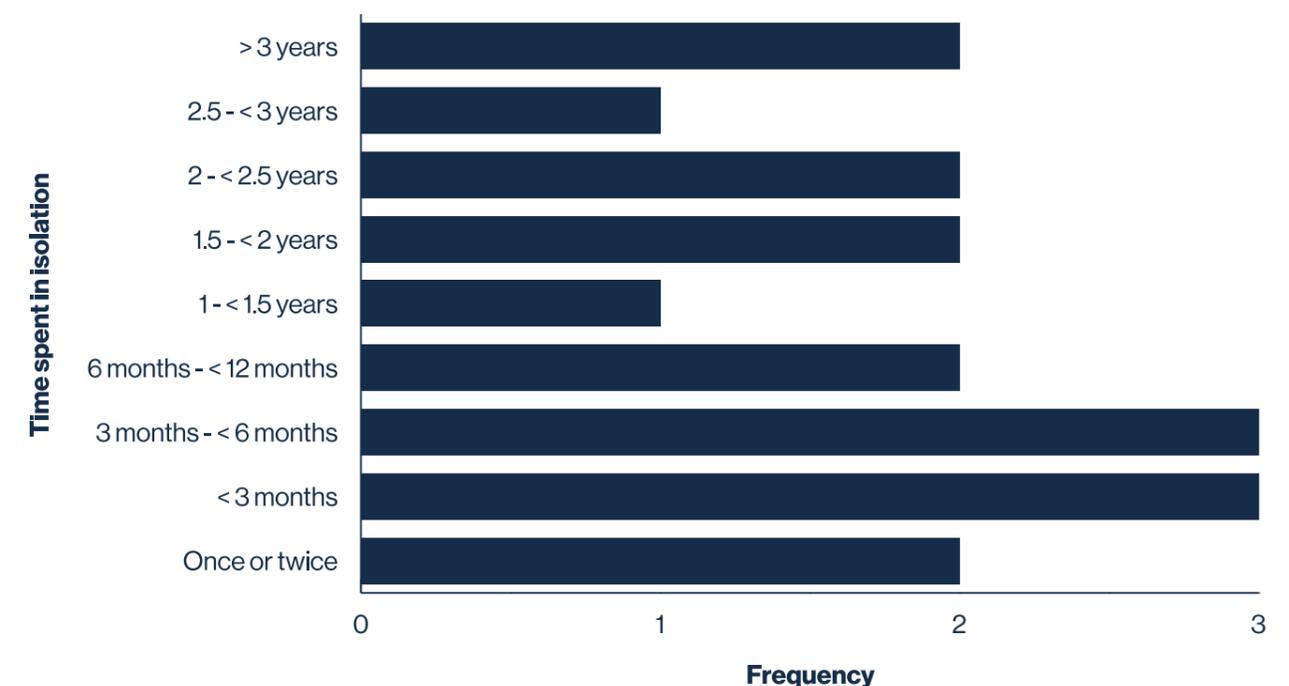
Likewise, on the use of part-time timetables, the DfE (2020, p. 19) states that as a rule, schools should not place children on a part-time timetable, but accept that in 'very exceptional circumstances there may be a need for a temporary part-time timetable to meet a pupil's individual needs.' Although the guidance suggests that a part-time timetable should not be a long-term solution, this may be the case for some children.

Statutory DfE guidance fails to define inclusion or guide schools in providing inclusive environments. This is notable in the SEND code of practice (DfE and DoH, 2015), the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017b) and the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). This could explain why some schools are exclusionary in their systems, processes and practices (Martin-Denham, 2021c).

To support children with SEND and enable them to thrive in mainstream schooling, there must be a robust process for assessing, identifying and responding to the range of individual needs and strengths that children present. Currently, the SEND code of practice (DfE and DoH, 2015, p. 94-95) only requires that 'a detailed assessment of need **should** ensure the full range of an individual's needs are identified, not simply the primary need'. This is echoed in guidance on exclusion from maintained schools (DfE, 2017), suggesting that 'where a school has concerns about a pupil's behaviour, it **should** try to identify causal factors and intervene early to reduce the need for a subsequent exclusion' (p. 6) and 'early intervention to address underlying causes of disruptive behaviour **should** include an assessment of whether appropriate provision is in place to support any SEN or disability (p. 10).'

Recommendations

- Soft wording of 'should' (encouraging rather than telling) that is used across multiple Department for Education statutory guidance documents is contributing to inconsistent opportunities and punishments experienced by children in mainstream schooling. It is recommended that statutory guidance is reviewed, and 'should' is changed to 'must', establishing a binding directive.

- Provide detailed guidance for nurseries, schools and colleges on evidence based inclusive approaches.

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