Investigating the characteristics of children in years 5/6 at moderate, high and very high risk of exclusion upon transition to secondary school as reported by SENCOs in the City of Sunderland.

Sarah Martin-Denham and Nathan Scott

May 2023

University of Sunderland

Summary

A Microsoft Office survey was circulated to Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and teachers in 97 junior and primary schools in the City of Sunderland. The study sought to investigate the characteristics of children in years 5/6 at moderate, high and very high risk of exclusion as reported by SENCOs and to determine their characteristics and educational support needs. Fifteen of the schools completed the survey (15%), the findings of which suggest that a scale helps identify the children at risk of exclusion from school. The SENCOs principally found that the criteria from the measure were characteristics that applied to their at-risk pupils. However, this was different for the school attendance criteria, a characteristic SENCOs overwhelmingly found non-applicable to their pupils. The SENCOs shared concerns regarding the children's transition to secondary school, including their ability to build relationships with teachers and other children, coping with the transition from a primary to secondary school environment, meeting behaviour expectations, adhering to rules and complying with sanctions, and dealing with the heightened stress brought by curriculum demands and teaching methods due to learning difficulties and disabilities.
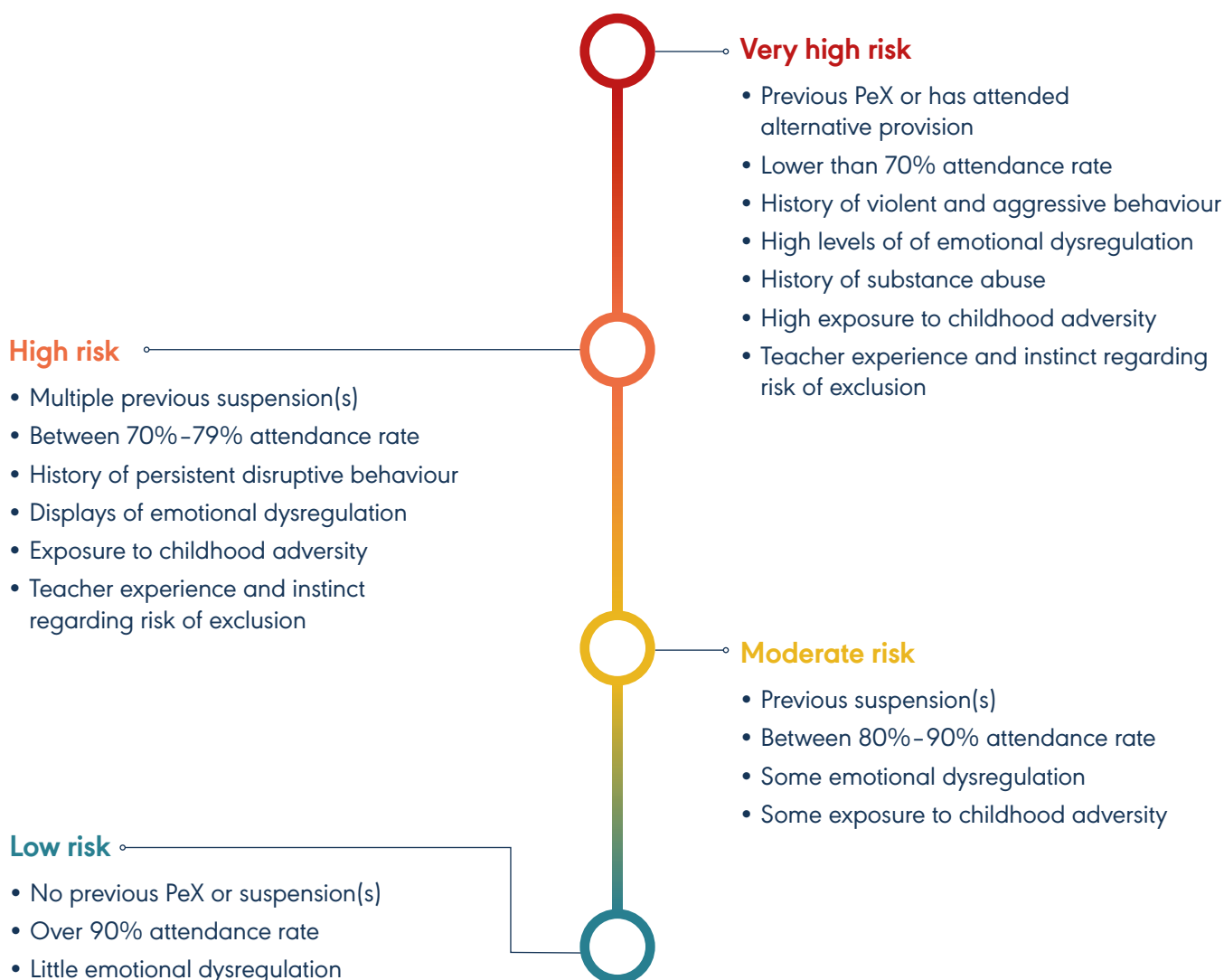
The recommendations are as follows:

1 Schools and local authorities to work together to proactively identify children at risk of school exclusion. This would enable preventative and targeted interventions to be put in place prior to their secondary school placement.

2 Local Authorities to create robust transition arrangements through co-production with children and their families to reduce the risk of school exclusion.

Introduction

The 2020-2021 (DfE, 2021) education statistics data reported that suspension and permanent exclusion rates were higher in Northeast England compared to the UK average. Although the permanent exclusion and suspension rates have decreased in the Autumn 2022 term (DfE, 2022), the Northeast continues to have the highest exclusion rates in the UK.

This project sought to identify the years 5/6 children in the academic year 2021/2022 who were at moderate/high and very high risk of school exclusion using the measure in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Measure for identifying children at risk of school exclusion

Very high risk
- Previous PeX or has attended alternative provision
- Lower than 70% attendance rate
- History of violent and aggressive behaviour
- High levels of of emotional dysregulation
- History of substance abuse
- High exposure to childhood adversity
- Teacher experience and instinct regarding risk of exclusion

High risk
- Multiple previous suspension(s)
- Between 70%–79% attendance rate
- History of persistent disruptive behaviour
- Displays of emotional dysregulation
- Exposure to childhood adversity
- Teacher experience and instinct regarding risk of exclusion

Moderate risk
- Previous suspension(s)
- Between 80%–90% attendance rate
- Some emotional dysregulation
- Some exposure to childhood adversity

Low risk
- No previous PeX or suspension(s)
- Over 90% attendance rate
- Little emotional dysregulation

Aims and objectives

1 Identify the Y5/Y6 children at the highest risk of suspension or permanent exclusion

2 Determine the characteristics and educational support needs of children identified as moderate/high and very high risk of school exclusion

Methods

Following ethical and information governance approvals in Spring 2022 (post Covid-19 restrictions), a Microsoft Office survey was circulated to SENCOs in 97 junior and primary schools. As data controller, Together for Children (TfC) distributed the survey on behalf of the research team at the University of Sunderland. The schools identified from their year five and six cohorts, using the measure in Figure 1, children at moderate/high and very high risk of school exclusion in the next three years. Schools were asked to include the Unique Pupil Number (UPN) so that additional data fields could be added by TfC, including age, year group, Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, cared-for status, first language, absence data and gender.

Data analysis

Fifteen of the 97 schools (15%) responded to the survey. Across these schools, 27 children were identified as being at risk of school exclusion upon transition to secondary school. The schools supplied a UPN to TfC for 22 children (81%), to allow the additional data fields to be added. Therefore, five children were missing these extra data fields. TfC de-identified the data to share with the research team. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey data.

Results

Gender, FSM and cared for status

The majority of the 22 pupils whose gender was recorded were male (n=19) (86%) (Table 1). Where recorded, all children had English as their primary language (n=22). Thirteen (59%) of those documented were eligible for free school meals. One of the children was recorded as being 'cared for'. The exclusion risk level was distributed evenly between children in school years 5 and 6, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Gender of pupils broken down by exclusion risk level

Moderate Risk			High Risk			Very High Risk		
Male	Female	Not reported	Male	Female	Not reported	Male	Female	Not reported
5	2	1	12	1	3	2	0	1

Table 2. Risk level by year group

Moderate Risk			High Risk			Very High Risk		
Year 5	Year 6	Not reported	Year 5	Year 6	Not reported	Year 5	Year 6	Not reported
3	4	1	7	6	3	1	1	1

Table 3 shows that 81% (n=22) of the 27 pupils were designated as SEN support, 7.4% (n=2) as EHCP and 11% (n=3) as no SEN. None of the children identified as very high risk of school exclusion had an EHCP. The most common primary type of need was social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), as shown in Table 4.

Schools predicted the type of exclusion students might receive in secondary school. Table 5 shows that respondents believed that 78% (n=21) of the children they identified would receive suspensions and permanent exclusions from school.

Table 3. SEND designation

	SEN Support	EHCP	No SEN
Moderate	4	1	3
High	15	1	0
Very high	3	0	0

Table 4. Primary types of need

	ASD	MLD	SEMH	SpLD	None
Moderate	1	2	2	0	3
High	3	0	12	1	0
Very high	1	0	1	1	0

*Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD), Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)

Table 5. Risk of specific type of exclusion

	Suspension only	Permanent exclusion only	Both
Moderate	0	1	7
High	4	1	11
Very high	0	0	3

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data: moderate risk of school exclusion

Quantitative data analysis: Moderate risk of school exclusion

Eight of the 27 children (30%) were identified as being at moderate risk of school exclusion. The schools were asked to explain how the characteristics of each child related to the scale (Figure 1). Table 6 shows that all eight children at moderate risk of school exclusion displayed some emotional dysregulation; most had experienced childhood adversity and half had already been suspended. The average attendance rate for the eight children was 90% (Autumn/Spring 2021). Of the eight children identified, four had no diagnoses from external services, while four had upcoming assessments (Table 7).

Table 6. Characteristics of children at moderate risk of school exclusion

Moderate risk of exclusion criteria	Applicable	Not applicable
Previous suspensions	4	4
Between 80-89% attendance rate	3	5
Some emotional dysregulation	8	0
Some exposure to childhood adversity	6	2

Table 7. Upcoming assessments or diagnoses from external services

None	CAMHS	CYPS	ECHP assessment	TfC Children's social care	Other
4	2	1	1	1	1

* Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Children and Young People Services (CYPS)

Qualitative data analysis: moderate risk of exclusion

Predicted difficulties for children identified as moderate risk of exclusion

The survey extracts are shown in Table 8, alongside an overarching theme. The responses share the difficulties children are expected to encounter in their transition to secondary school.

Table 8. Predicted difficulties for children identified as moderate risk of exclusion

Theme	Potential difficulties
Building new relationships	Meeting new adults
	Relationships with different members of staff
	Building relationships with adults and children
	Different staff/support staff
	Competing peer groups
	Mixing with new pupils from a range of areas/backgrounds
	Friendships
Lack of awareness of learning needs	Not aware of her learning needs
	staff not understanding their needs
	Understanding the complex language
	Following adult instructions
	Different expectations of staff
	Needs a small group setting with high adult ratio
Transition/new systems and processes	Managing the transition
	Finds change difficult and would be likely to struggle to move from class to class and teacher to teacher
	Moving around classes
	Moving around the school
	Disorganised-losing equipment
	Struggles with less structured times of the day
	Lacks independence
Behaviour expectations	Meeting standards of classroom expectations e.g. swinging on chair
	Behaviour
	Following school rules and routines
	Being easily influenced by others
	Higher expectations of secondary school
	Lack of consistency in behaviour expectations
Self-regulation	Needs anger management
	Struggles to manage his emotions which can result in verbal and physical violent outbursts towards other children and staff
Victimisation	Bullying, name calling, violence

Education support needs: Moderate risk of exclusion

Most survey respondents reported that the children they identified as having a moderate risk of exclusion would encounter difficulties at secondary school due to their high support needs and challenging behaviours. Some felt that their low academic ability would be a barrier to schooling; 'they have an EHCP due to their low academic levels. She needs a high level of support as she struggles to read and will refuse to complete work that is too challenging.' Others expressed concern about how the children would cope without small group and pastoral support, sensory breaks and access to a trusted adult, or with a different curriculum. A few respondents believed the child would have an increased risk of school exclusion due to their disabilities, for example, autism and specific learning disabilities that cause them to experience significant anxiety.

Potential solutions to support transition to mainstream secondary school: moderate risk of exclusion

Overwhelmingly, the respondents shared that pastoral support, trusted adults and supportive staff would support the transition from primary to secondary school. They also suggested that teachers should be made aware of the children's needs for boundaries, space and positive relationships.

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data: high risk of school exclusion

Quantitative data analysis: high risk of school exclusion

Sixteen out of 27 children (59%) were identified as being at high risk of school exclusion. The schools were asked to explain how the characteristics of each child related to the scale (Figure 1). Table 9 shows that all 16 children at high risk of school exclusion displayed some emotional dysregulation and had a history of persistent disruptive behaviour. Most had experienced childhood adversity and a quarter had already received multiple previous suspensions from school. The average attendance rate for the eight children was 93% (Autumn/Spring 2021).

Table 9. Characteristics of children at high risk of school exclusion

High risk of exclusion criteria	Applicable	Not applicable
Multiple suspensions	4	12
Between 70–79% attendance rate	1	15
History of persistent disruptive behaviour	16	0
Emotional dysregulation	16	0
Exposure to childhood adversity	11	5
Teacher experience and instinct regarding risk of exclusion	16	0

Of the 16 children identified as high risk, eight had no diagnoses or upcoming assessments from external services, and 8 had diagnoses or upcoming assessments (Table 10).

Table 10. Upcoming assessments or diagnoses from external services

None	CAMHS	CYPS	EHC needs assessment	Paediatric disability assessment	Counselling services	Behaviour support	Other
8	4	3	2	1	1	1	1

Qualitative data analysis: high risk of exclusion

The comments from the respondents were similar to the predicted difficulties for children with moderate risk of exclusion. However, no respondents identified a concern that teachers would not have the knowledge and understanding to meet the child's diverse needs.

Table 11. Predicted difficulties of children identified as high risk of school exclusion

Theme	Potential difficulties
Building new relationships	Building relationships with adults x 3
	New faces x3
	Large number of adults to work with
	Struggles with children with similar needs
	Easily led-peer pressure
	Making and maintaining friendships x2
	Physical to other pupils
Transition/new systems and processes	Change of adult and classes throughout the day, transitioning between classes and teachers x 5
	Unstructured times (between lessons/ break times) x 2
	Having to mix with a larger number of peers
	Noise and crowds
	I think they will struggle with organising efficiently
	Consistency of the staff approach to managing his behaviour works well in primary; will it be as possible in secondary?
Behaviour expectations	Responding to rules and expectations from staff x 7
	Task avoidance
	Consequences
	He currently requires a high level of supervision, when in unstructured activity, in order for him to make positive choices.
	Personal/ inappropriate comments to staff
	Not swearing
	Refusal
	Moving around school-too many temptations
	Moving around the school
Self-regulation	Emotional and impulsive behaviours x5
	Managing and controlling aggressive behaviours x4
	Has sensory issues x2
	Low tolerance levels
	Perceived injustice
	Capacity and expectations in secondary will prevent the use of de-escalation strategies

Education support needs: high risk of exclusion

The respondents emphasised the need for CAMHS and CYPS involvement, noting that many families were on long waiting lists or were not currently engaged with these services. They also highlighted the importance of support plans for SEMH, behaviour, and transition to secondary education. Some respondents noted that children were receiving counselling from external services, while others suggested that the children would benefit from in-school counselling. Some respondents also mentioned small class sizes and breaks from schoolwork. Respondents working with children who had diagnoses expressed the desire for extra training for staff concerning their diagnoses.

Potential solutions to support transition to mainstream secondary school

In line with the suggestions offered for children at moderate risk of exclusion, the suggested solutions for children at high risk of exclusion included the presence of trusted adults, pastoral care, and clear boundaries and expectations. However, these responses also had more detailed suggestions predominantly focused on SEMH support, such as additional sessions in their new school, designated counsellors, anger management, safe spaces and regular check-ins during the school day.

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data: Very high risk of exclusion

Quantitative data analysis: Very high risk of school exclusion

Three children were identified as being at high risk of school exclusion. Table 12 shows that all three displayed some emotional dysregulation, had a history of persistent disruptive behaviour and previous permanent exclusions, or had attended alternative provision. None had a history of substance misuse and one had high exposure to childhood adversity. Their average attendance rate was 86% (Autumn/Spring 2021). All three had upcoming CYPS appointments and ECHP assessments, while one also had an upcoming appointment with counselling services (Table 13).

Table 12. Characteristics of children at high risk of school exclusion

Very high risk of exclusion criteria	Applicable	Not applicable
Previous permanent exclusion or has attended Alternative Provision	3	0
Lower than 70% attendance rate	1	2
Has a history of violent and aggressive behaviour	3	0
High levels of emotional dysregulation	3	0
Has a history of substance misuse	0	3
High exposure to childhood adversity	1	2
Teacher experience and instinct regarding risk of exclusion	3	0

Table 13. Upcoming assessments or diagnoses from external services

CYPS	ECHP assessment	Counselling services
3	3	1

Qualitative data analysis: very high risk of school exclusion

The respondents suggested a limited number of potential difficulties that children at very high risk of exclusion would experience. Building relationships, self-regulation and victimisation were not mentioned as potential barriers to accessing and thriving in mainstream secondary school.

Table 14. Potential difficulties

Theme	Potential difficulties
Lack of awareness of learning needs	Lack of understanding of triggers
Accessing the curriculum and teaching	Curriculum
	Reading
	Complex timetables
The school environment	Loud noises x2
Behaviour expectations	Moving to multiple rooms
	Lack of consistency e.g. different teachers, sitting in different seats, next to different pupils
	Lack of ability to remove self from the classroom to a safe, quiet space (with a consistent adult)
Making friends	Making friends
	Social interactions with peers

Education support needs: very high risk of exclusion

The comments were similar to the education and support needs reported for children at moderate and high risk of exclusion. Of utmost importance was consistent and knowledgeable adults; 'work with consistent adults who are fully aware of their needs and know how to communicate effectively when they are in crisis', with flexible access to pastoral support. Small group or 1:1 teaching with access to safe spaces for times of crisis were deemed essential if the child was to cope and thrive in mainstream secondary school. A highly differentiated curriculum, with scaffolded learning, reward systems and assistive technology were identified as necessary in preventing exclusion. Positive behaviour support plans, shared and understood by staff, were critical, as were regular check-ins, rewards and pre-warning of changes to the daily routine.

Potential solutions to support transition to mainstream secondary school

While all three children at very high risk of exclusion had upcoming EHCP assessments, two respondents suggested that these children required further support with the EHCP. Two also emphasised the need for a stronger, more specialist SEN provision in secondary school.

Discussion

This briefing paper set out to investigate the characteristics of children in years 5/6 at moderate, high and very high risk of exclusion, as reported by SENCOs in 15 schools in the City of Sunderland. The results suggest that a scale is useful in identifying the children at risk of exclusion from school.

1 Identify the Y5/Y6 children at the highest risk of suspension or permanent exclusion

Although only 15 of the 97 schools approached responded to the survey, the respondents successfully used the criteria presented to them to identify pupils with a moderate, high and very high risk of school exclusion. The respondents were predominantly of the belief that the pupils they identified were at risk of both suspensions and permanent exclusions upon transition to secondary school.

2 Determine the characteristics and educational support needs of children identified as moderate/high and very high risk of school exclusion

Any discussion of this study's findings must be contextualised, as only 15 of the 97 schools in Sunderland responded to the survey. Furthermore, there was considerable missing data for some demographic information, as five schools did not provide a UPN to link the survey data to this demographic information. For this reason, all of the quantitative analysis was descriptive, with no inferential statistics used.

This study introduced a scale for assessing exclusion risk based on research evidence (Martin-Denham, 2020), and guidance from TfC and a local headteacher in AP. The measure included various criteria to identify whether children are at low, moderate, high or very high risk of exclusion upon transition from primary to secondary school. Furthermore, the measure allows teacher intuition to take precedence over these criteria if they have strong beliefs about a child's exclusion risk, based on their knowledge and experience.

The utility of the exclusion risk measure demonstrated the teachers' belief that the children they had identified as being at moderate, high or very high risk of exclusion met the respective criteria, including disruptive or aggressive behaviour, childhood adversity and emotional dysregulation. However, one criterion not met across all risk levels was attendance rate. This suggests that, for this sample of children and schools, attendance rate did not indicate how teachers would assess a child's risk of exclusion. The authors suggest testing this measure further to determine whether attendance is a reliable indicator of exclusion risk.

Despite all 27 of the children having been identified as at risk of exclusion, only two had an EHCP, with seven awaiting upcoming EHC needs assessments. Similarly, of the 16 children identified as 'high risk' of exclusion, eight had no upcoming assessments or appointments with any services, suggesting no intervention was planned for any of these children to prevent exclusion.

The limited responses in this sample suggest a higher risk of exclusion for males and/or pupils entitled to FSM. There was no indication that the risk of exclusion was higher if the child had a lower attendance rate in this sample. To confidently infer whether this is a significant effect, the research would require a larger sample size and knowledge of the base rates for gender and FSM eligibility in Sunderland.

This research also summarised qualitative responses to the survey. Most respondents answered the open-ended questions thoroughly, providing an overview of the critical difficulties, needs and possible solutions for the pupils identified as at risk of school exclusion. These responses were summarised separately for moderate risk, high risk and very high-risk pupils.

The SENCOs had several concerns regarding the children's transition to secondary school:

1 Challenges in building relationships with teachers and other children

2 Coping with transitioning from a primary school to a completely different secondary school environment

3 Meeting behaviour expectations, adhering to rules and complying with sanctions

4 Their ability to self-regulate at times of heightened stress

5 Accessing the curriculum and teaching methods due to learning difficulties and disabilities

Preventative approaches to reduce school exclusion are needed to stem the increasing rates of children excluded from school.

Recommendations

1 Schools and local authorities to work together to proactively identify children at risk of school exclusion. This would enable preventative and targeted interventions to be put in place prior to their secondary school placement.

2 Local Authorities to create robust transition arrangements through co-production with children and their families to reduce the risk of school exclusion.

Future research

Future research should allocate sufficient resources to reach a more significant number of schools. The authors of this research will aim to follow up with the 15 schools in this study to assess whether the at-risk children received any suspensions or permanent exclusions upon transition to secondary school.

Funded by:

UKRI Policy Support Fund 2021-22

References

Department for Education (2022) *Statistics: exclusions statistics on pupils who are excluded from school.* London: DfE.

Martin-Denham, S. (2020) *An investigation into the perceived enablers and barriers to mainstream schooling: The voices of children excluded from school, their caregivers and professionals.* Sunderland: University of Sunderland.