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McShane, Jo (2020) We know off-rolling happens. Why are we still doing nothing? Support for Learning. ISSN 0268-2141

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WE KNOW OFF-ROLLING HAPPENS

We know off-rolling happens. Why are we still doing nothing?

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Described by General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Geoff Barton as 'beyond repugnant' (TES, 2017), 'off-rolling' is the removal of pupils from the school roll via various unofficial means. This study positions a plethora of triggers for this form of exclusion, its prevalence and wider social implications. These perspectives will be evaluated alongside current national data and media perspectives, integrated with the outcomes of narrative accounts from practitioners in schools across England in 2018. The study concludes by commenting on the impact of performance-driven school cultures on limiting the choices parents and pupils are able to make when confronted by the prospect of exclusion from education. The longer-term social dangers presented by labelling a cohort of young people as marginal to education and society are considered, as is the fitness for purpose of the current education system in the meeting of pupil needs.

Key words: Off-rolling, exclusion, academies, outcomes, disadvantage, narratives.

Introduction

In December 2017, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman referenced findings from *education datalab* which confirmed patterns of unofficial exclusion as

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DOI: 10.1111/1467-9604.12309

evidence that ‘a long overdue spotlight has been shed on the issue’ (Spielman, 2017, p.). Whilst acknowledging an explicit relationship between pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), unofficial exclusions and schools seeking to boost performance indicators, Spielman branded the trend as ‘a more extreme and invidious example of where some schools have lost sight of the purpose of education, which should always be to give children the support that they deserve’ (Spielman, 2017, p.), and committed to ensuring inspectors interrogate and expose potential evidence of a tragedy Ofsted refer to as ‘gaming’ (Spielman, 2017, p.). Though this was followed in 2020 by a YouGov report, off-rolling has still not received an official definition and remains unaddressed as a phenomenon despite compelling data (YouGov, 2020).

The unquantified yet formally-acknowledged practice of ‘unofficial exclusion’ has been linked to a change in schools’ understanding of their educational purpose, an identity shift which has manifested itself in an increasing number of secondary students finding themselves ‘ghosted’ from school registers and existing on the margins of educational life. High-profile media coverage has reported on the thousands of teenagers excluded and sent to pupil referral units by schools and academies to boost examination results (Morgan-Bentley, 2018b). Emergent demographic trends pertaining to this growing group include pupils with SEND (Spielman, 2017; Morgan-Bentley, 2018a; YouGov, 2020), persistent behavioural problems (Parker *et al.*, 2016) and low educational achievement (Guardian, 2018; House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2018), though the unlawful and unreported nature of the practice of off-rolling, combined with a lack of formal research on the theme, renders the task of securing definitive and comprehensive data almost impossible. What is clear, however, is that the practice exists, is potentially widespread and has slowly found its way to Ofsted’s agenda over the past four years. We know it has destructive implications for children and young people who find themselves marginalised and appears to be consistent with the demands of school outcomes, academisation and the practice of ‘gaming’ (Spielman, 2017; YouGov, 2020) observed in secondary schools. This paper will seek to explore the emergent themes from the narrative perspectives of three school practitioners alongside thematically-related literature to establish emergent patterns and drivers in the practice of unofficial exclusion.

What are ‘Off-rolling’ and ‘Unofficial Exclusion, and who does this affect?’

Although no official definition appears to exist, for the purpose of discussion we will approach off-rolling as form of social inequality, since it refers to the actions

of organisations which reduce an individual's access to education. Emerging data provide direct correlations between off-rolling and identifiable groups of children such as those with SEND (Menzies and Baars, 2015; Gill, 2017; Spielman, 2017), which alone is sufficient to consider the undermining of social justice the issue presents within English schools. Berntein's (1996, 2000) examinations of disaffection and inequality within schools provides a useful starting point for the 'hidden' mechanism for marginalisation presented by unofficial exclusion, and how its relationship with forms of disadvantage may be mediated by schools. Indeed, Menzies and Baars (2015) reflect on the term 'pushed out' to provide an overarching identifier for children who, for multiple reasons and based on complex needs, find themselves outside of education and therefore unable to access their right to educational opportunities.

Though literature on the theme of 'off-rolling' as a discreet subject is scant, Gill (2017) and Menzies and Baars (2015) provide relevant foci in their considerations of the impact of exclusion per se from mainstream education in England and Wales. Gill (2017) contrasts Department for Education (DfE, 2017) data which show 6,685 officially-recorded exclusions in 2016 alongside 48,000 students registered in Alternative Provision (AP) settings to highlight the potential for a vast number of illegal exclusions within the system, compounded by the blurred legalities of some parental decisions to 'home educate' following advice given by schools. Indeed, Gill (2017) cites the Children's Commissioner finding from 2013 that a small percentage of schools admit to encouraging parents to remove their child from the school roll and home educate, a figure which is likely to have risen alongside the increase in formal exclusions reported by DfE in 2017 (DfE, 2017). A small report commissioned by Ofsted explored the triggers and barriers to illegal removal of pupils from the school roll, and though recommendations are yet to inform interventions or policy (YouGov, 2020), patterns identified do map across the analysis presented in this paper.

As this enquiry will go on to explore, the key characteristics of pupils who are formally excluded from school are poverty, complex needs, gender and some trends relating to ethnicity (Gill, 2017; DfE, 2017), which mirror patterns of educational inequality identified by Ball (2013). Indeed, the top three reasons for pupils being formally excluded in DfE data were behavioural issues, physical violence and 'other', while the Free School Meals (FSM) indicators showed that excluded children are overwhelmingly poor. The 'other' category, which ranks above drug and alcohol- and verbal abuse-related exclusions, draws our attention to the challenges in gaining an accurate picture of the real extent of exclusion in

all its forms, or its drivers beyond the broad brush of overlapping, complex needs (Menzies and Baars, 2015; Gill, 2017).

Where does the problem originate, and how does it impact?

Although primarily focussed on alternative provision, the Education Select Committee Report ‘Forgotten Children’ (2018) included a section relating specifically to the issue of pupils attending settings outside the mainstream without having been formally excluded from their school, yet no longer appearing as a pupil on roll. The ‘gaming’ implication of this is that students who are at risk of low achievement can no longer reduce the average outcome scores of their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) cohort. Indeed, direct links were made in the report between the need to maintain high, Progress 8 scores, the associated impact of a narrowing school curriculum and the lack of specialist, early intervention required to ensure all pupils have the chance to achieve at GCSE. Tragically, the new measures were introduced to increase inclusion and access, though as one respondent highlighted:

It can be argued that Progress 8 is a more inclusive standard in that it reflects the average progress of all students in a school. But it is progress in a far narrower set of subjects than would have been considered before. Creative and technical subjects, which a lower-ability child would find more accessible, have lost their validity and are disappearing from many schools. (Head of a PRU, p. 13).

Overall, though the Education Select Committee (2018) acknowledged the prevalence, illegality and impacts of ‘off-rolling’ and its direct links to the outcomes pressures driving schools, recommendations made were sparse and vague with regards to securing accountability for the practice beyond encouraging pupil and parental empowerment and not deferring responsibility to Ofsted. Perhaps this limited call to action can be linked to the segmentation of school settings in an era of academisation, leading to disarray in the management of local arrangements and the associated difficulty in identifying the direct causes of exclusion. As Ball (2018) highlights, the growth of academisation has rendered Local Authorities (LAs) unable to properly manage and carry out the legal obligations for which they remain accountable. It could be argued that the main pupil groups affected by the move away from centralisation are those with identifiable needs, such as pupils with SEND and behavioural needs, those on Free School Meals and

children who are ‘Looked After’, a picture which is compounded by a steep rise in students who suffer from poor mental health (YouGov, 2020, Gill, 2017).

When systems become fragmented, standards can rapidly disintegrate and allow inequalities to become the norm. Ball (2018) refers to the dangers of the ‘absence of local planning oversight and as a result uneven patterns of over- and under provision’ (p. 213). This could be the reason the Select Committee failed to make binding recommendations in relation to off-rolling that were likely to adhere to any particular public body, which leads us to question the role of the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) in overseeing the formation and operation of academies. Rather than bringing continuity to standards and practices of inclusion, Ball (2018) argues they have further enhanced the displacement of local services, whilst appearing to hold a central role in the governance of strategic educational practice. The shadowy practice of unofficial exclusion appears to have become clogged up in the opaqueness and mire of organisational change, leaving groups of students in a position of vulnerability, exacerbated by occluded systems (Ball, 2018). The cumulative impacts of system deficits illustrated by the IPPR report (2017) (which curiously did not feature in the Education Select Committee report of 2018), draw our focus to missed opportunities for joined up, inter-agency thinking about exclusion:

Still more exclusions are being hidden, and children are lost from government oversight. Tens of thousands of pupils leave school rolls in what appear to be instances of illegal exclusion. The numbers of pupils becoming electively home educated have more than doubled over the past four years; some local authorities attribute this to illegal exclusion. (Gill, 2017, p. 15)

Does it have to be this way?

New Labour introduced targets to reduce exclusion and increase AP which, combined (Ogg and Kell, 2010), led to a dramatic decrease in the number of students who were formally excluded between 1998/9 and 2011/12 (Menzies and Baars, 2015) via a combination of enhanced mainstream provision and improved access to alternative educational settings. However, the literature points out that, rather than offering an acceptable and valued alternative to mainstream for students with identified needs, AP is viewed as a lesser route to educational outcomes (YouGov, 2020). Whilst this is in part due to perceptions (Menzies and

Baars, 2015; Education Select Committee, 2018), the limited value of education beyond the mainstream is compounded by the likelihood of being taught by an unqualified teacher (Gill, 2017) and becoming further removed from access to personalised provision to meet complex needs (Gill, 2017) such as mental health intervention. Lack of access to a qualified and effective teacher (Gill, 2017) can have a lasting and significant impact on students:

The effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds: over a school year, these pupils gain 1.5 years' worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with poorly performing teachers. In other words, for poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning. (Sutton Trust, 2011, p. 2.)

For vulnerable students, this impact is especially worrying, given the risk of driving down social mobility and anchoring them in long-term poverty. According to Gill (2017), while the personal costs of exclusion on life chances is incalculable, the economic and social impacts are stark. Citing IPPR data from 2017, Gill contrasts the potential costs of providing effective capacity within the education system to minimise all forms of exclusion with the estimated cost of £370,000 per excluded pupil which will be spent on lifetime education, health and criminal justice costs. This figure does not include students who are unofficially or illegally taken off the school roll. If, as Gill (2017) points out, the 6,685 exclusions *reported* by the DfE represent a total cost to the Treasury of 2.1 billion, the *actual* costs indicated by IPPR data (2017) may be five times higher.

Given the limited theoretical literature available, the potential impacts of exclusion on crime rates have been drawn from the political and media spotlight on off-rolling. In 2017, David Lammy, MP responded to the reported increase in exclusions by pointing out the stark relationship between attendance at a 'Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)' and the criminal justice system, claiming that exclusions are 'creating a pipeline of young people into our prison system' and positioning that there can be neither financial nor ethical justification for the tolerance of this practice (Weale, 2017). In May 2019, West Midlands Police Crime Commissioner David Jamieson announced plans to map patterns between pupil exclusion and engagement in criminality. In a press interview (Dare, 2019), Jameson encouraged the use of ring-fenced fines for schools found to have off-rolled pupils, which should be used to benefit the education of the individual moved to another setting.

Although drawn from an informal source, Jameson’s position (Dare, 2019) leads us to question the capacity of mainstream education to cater to the complex needs of pupils within the system. He also draws attention to possibility of directing funding to the enhancement of pupil transition into AP via legal means. Though all sources consulted emphasise that a solution to the issue is essential, a split exists between those who advocate for strengthening mainstream provision and those who advocate a complete re-think of the education system. While Ball (2013) and the Sutton Trust (2011) lean towards the notion of investing in real and effective inclusion within the current structure of schooling, Menzies and Baars (2015) ask whether mainstream schools can really deliver on the high expectations of all children. Menzies and Baars (2015) caution against the complete overhaul of the curriculum to meet life aspirations and skills of pupils with the reminder that the managerial and professional employment routes many aspire to still require level 3 qualifications. To manage the gulf between mainstream and AP which appears to be swallowing up achievement, potential, aspirations and life-chances, they argue that closer links should be built between both sectors and wider agencies to provide flexibility in building personal curricula (Menzies and Baars, 2015). Gill (2017) extends this by recommending a wholesale investment in building teaching and leadership capacity within AP via workforce development, bolstered by teacher skills enhancement in mainstream schools to reduce pupil numbers in transit between the two sectors. A connected suggestion emerges from Parker *et al.* (2016), who advocate for an immediate and comprehensive assessment of social, emotional and mental health needs at the point at which a pupil’s position on the school roll is at risk as a means of remedying persistent and disruptive behaviour, before it can lead to a costly deficit in their education.

My narrative research project

In March 2018, I conducted a case study report for the ‘Schools Mental Health’ working papers (McShane, 2018) via a series of semi-structured interviews with school staff in varied geographical locations across England. The first phase involved the launch of an anonymised poll via social media, followed by a call for research participants to engage in an anonymous, semi-structured telephone interview. Three adult respondents gave their informed consent to engagement in dialogue and to share their narratives. All research conversations were conducted with only approximate geographical locations identified, and pseudonyms were used to guarantee absolute anonymity. BERA (2011) guidelines were fully adhered to in ensuring that the study was conducted ethically. A comprehensive

literature review has been combined with the narrative to produce an integrated and informed evaluation of the scale, impact and risks of ‘off-rolling’ in English secondary schools.

An interpretative paradigm (Hammersley, 2012) was adopted in the collation of three transactional narrative practitioner accounts (Smith, 1989) to produce original research within an area of school life which has yet to generate a significant canon of academic literature. By choosing an explicitly subjectivist epistemological position, I consciously sought to create constructed knowledge as a live aspect of the enquiry process, thus removing the need to position an initial ontological stance relating to the nature of unofficial exclusion (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This methodological platform adds to the rigour, validity and originality of the study via the minimisation of bias arising from pre-set assumptions about the phenomena under investigation, thereby offsetting the impact of my own implicit beliefs. From this perspective, the findings also have a pragmatic value (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) in that the study was intentionally designed to explore a prevalent injustice by offering original and applicable research intelligence in an emerging field.

Exploring living stories on ‘off-rolling’

I will present living stories captured from three school practitioners in the construction of an informed and analytical exploration of exclusion within a competitive, increasingly marketised (Ball, 2011) and performance-driven (Ball, 2003) school sector, which has recently seen a flurry of reports relating to an increase in exclusion from mainstream schooling. I will also position a brief thematic analysis of narratives (McShane, 2018) and expand the themes emerging via the transferability of personal comments and field observations to the current educational landscape (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The human experience has been captured and retold through the medium of narrative for millennia, and has a long-standing tradition in constructivist, ethnographic and phenomenological fields of social enquiry (Elbas, 1988). When exploring the lived experience in schools, narrative forms of investigation have a unique potential to dig deep into the meaning of processes, outcomes, rules and norms. As noted by Connelly and Clandinn (1990), ‘Life’s narratives are the contexts for making meaning of school situations’ (p. 3), which positions narrativism as a useful tool for exploring forms of educational experience such as ‘off-rolling’, which exist beyond the formal, recorded and overt realities of education.

Practitioner narratives

Though limited in scale and problematic in terms of transferability, the reflections of the three practitioners I interviewed provide a valuable narrative for examination alongside evaluation of the wider policy context. All three respondents were female, two worked in the secondary sector and one in primary. Two of those interviewed worked in leadership positions, and the third was a longstanding teaching assistant (TA). All three testified to having observed multiple incidents where pupils had been removed from their school roll via means beyond the formal exclusion process.

I initially presented surveys on Twitter to gain a sense of national coverage. Though response rates were too low to establish valid claims, they represented a mixture of maintained secondary schools and academies. Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs), teachers and other inclusion workers returned data indicating that the overwhelming majority had experienced off-rolling and that the predominant reasons were linked to SEND and the school's inability to provide an appropriate curriculum to meet their needs. Only three respondents provided comments to indicate their willingness to participate in a semi-structured depth-interview interview by telephone.

All three interviewees stipulated that their precise geographical location must not be used and expressed a fear that their comments may be in some way be recognised by others. One went as far as to say that she would love to have the courage to 'whistle blow', but that such action would be a 'career-wrecker' because 'you just don't report these things. You don't pass them on. You don't talk about them at all.' One striking commonality emerging was the emotional nature of responses. Discussion about 'off-rolling' was evidently provocative of feeling and, in the case of each of my respondents, touched upon raw nerves and revealed manifest conflict within professional identities. Each respondent has been given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. It is worth noting that, since my research project, Ofsted published snapshot findings around the phenomenon, many of which conflate with the outcomes of my practitioner narratives (YouGov, 2020).

Narrative 1: 'They move them round the MAT'. Female, SLT member, South East England

Helen readily disclosed that she witnesses 'unofficial exclusion' on a weekly basis within her school and across the wider Trust. 'We have quite a lot of schools

and they move them as soon as they become too much of an irritation in the system.’ When asked what she meant by ‘moved’, she indicated that cross-school transfers took place regularly, which usually resulted in the student ending up in the school where they will do the ‘least damage’ to Progress and Attainment 8. ‘By moving pupils from the roll for a time, they aren’t registered anywhere which has the added benefit of improving data.’ We talked about reasons for off-rolling for some time, and she identified behaviour, attainment and poor attendance as the key triggers, adding that ‘I know it isn’t right, but we have a school to lead, other pupils to manage and the constant pressure to improve. These are kids who have failed to respond to numerous interventions and whose parents have chosen not to support the school in our efforts to resolve issues.’ During the conversation, Helen expressed mixed feelings about the issue, indicating that she sometimes felt the schools were ‘failing the pupils’ but that ‘other agencies can’t come up with the answers.’ To conclude, she told me that the pressure on schools to retain their Ofsted Outstanding status is driving them to make decisions they would otherwise never consider.

Narrative 2: ‘They can’t deal with them, so they go’. Female, HLTA (SEND), North West England

Michelle has been employed at her school for twelve years and specialises in SEND and inclusion. ‘Our kids are from very mixed backgrounds and you would never see this kind of thing happening to middle class families because they fight it. It’s the poorer children with needs who are affected time and time again.’ When asked about the regularity of ‘off-rolling’, she confirmed that around six children per year appear to ‘vanish’ from the school roll, in addition to those formally and permanently excluded. ‘When parents are faced with fines and constant fixed term exclusions they tend to cave in and home educate. I’ve been sent out with work and to provide tuition in the early stages, but this always fizzles out. No-one asks any questions, which just seems unfair.’ We talked about trends and patterns and she readily confirmed, ‘It’s always the same. Pupils on the SEND register, especially those with ADHD or mental health issues will go first. We can help with dyslexia and ASD, but repeated bad behaviour only leads one way. The school PEX’d [permanently excluded] six pupils last term, so we can’t have any more on the books.’ Michelle spoke in detail about individual (anonymised) cases and claimed senior members of staff use ‘police-like tactics to manage behaviour. If I was screamed at and given only ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as answers to questions, I think

I'd cave in and take the rap too. It's aggressive and borderline abusive. The worst thing I've seen was a child being seated in front of the local authority website and told to fill in their own transfer form. It's unbearable.' Michelle concluded her interview by expressing her disappointment in education, telling me, 'I did my MA in Special Education and intended to train to be a teacher. It's the same everywhere and I really do think I'd be better getting out of mainstream.'

Narrative 3: 'Quite simply, such practices are abhorrent'. Female, Headteacher, Primary School, North-East England

Liz has been headteacher of a large urban primary school for more than a decade. Having requested secondary participants, I was initially surprised to receive her offer of an interview. She stressed the importance of maintaining inclusion throughout a child's education and that she felt disappointed to hear that so many of her former pupils end up going through a series of failed 'managed moves' before ending their education in alternative provision. 'The shame of it is that we have fantastic transition arrangements with our secondaries and we are all happy with the passage of information and support for moving up. Our secondaries allocate time and resources to giving students the best start, which is why it is so disappointing to hear, through families that their children didn't make it through their mainstream schooling.' Liz illustrated frequent conversations about the pressure secondary colleagues experience, which she said 'affects their professional judgment.' She did add that she is angry with a system that claims to measure standards while allowing schools to 'gamble with life-chances.' Although Liz did not share her perceptions on predominate pupil groups affected, she did mention that the complexity of secondary schooling is challenging for 'needy families' and that 'covert exclusion' adds to the strain. When I asked Liz if she had discussed any individual cases with secondary headteachers, she responded, 'I'm not the person who should be holding them to account. This is a wider issue and someone needs to start challenging what we all know is bare-faced exclusion. Secondaries need support to meet needs and to contextualise the impact of individual needs on data.' At the close of our conversation she made a point of referencing local secondary schools that 'go to great lengths to meet the needs of their pupils. Their results take a dent, but they are relentless in providing for individual needs. I hope there is some way of recognising this, because their exclusion rates remain low despite the fact they take on unwanted pupils from their neighbours.'

Discussion

Though valuable in terms of narrative expression, the data presented cannot provide a broad and accurate picture of the scale and prevalence of unofficial exclusion in English secondary schools. The patterns emerging, however, are strikingly consistent with the drivers for this practice explored by the Education Select Committee (2018), Morgan-Bentley (2018a), and YouGov (2020) by identifying the pressure of increasing outcomes as a key factor in the movement of pupils from and between educational settings. The third respondent, Liz, did allude to ‘unwanted’ pupils being from ‘needy families’ and the impact on ‘life chances’, and Michelle referenced ‘poorer children’ as the key group affected by this ‘covert practice’. While this alone does not provide sufficient evidence to draw out finite evidence of socio-economic relevance or the patterns of exclusion and disadvantage identified by Ball (2013), the plethora of research outcomes testifying to the relationship between socio-economic factors and underachievement. This aspect of the narrative will be further explored later in the discussion. Gill (2017) cited DfE data demonstrating that, on average, poorer young people are four times more likely to be excluded than their wealthier peers (DfE 2017a), and patterns in the YouGov study of 2020 show strong correlations, especially relating to the limitation of parental understanding.

All respondents made reference to either parental engagement, the limited choices possessed by individuals faced with the threat of off-rolling, the impact on long-term life chances for pupils finding themselves off ‘the books’ (Michelle), and the idea of pupils within this group as being ‘unwanted’ (Liz). If we position the present educational system as being marketised in nature, evidenced by the high outcomes expectations and rigorous quality control applied by Ofsted, it is reasonable to concede Harvey’s (2005) assertion that the government is faced with an inescapable pressure to maintain the market conditions within a neo-liberal system of schooling. The concept of pupils and parents as consumers or recipients of a (state) funded service is impossible to overlook, which leads to the obvious question of the power of consumer choices. All publications and media articles covered in this piece pay detailed attention to disenfranchisement and the resultant inequality, which cannot be permitted to continue within a quality-driven schools sector. Arguably, some consumers have a stronger level of choice, agency and, therefore, participation and achievement than others. Hindess (1986) states that even before the full development of a multi-layered service approach to education initiated by New Labour (1997–2010), not all choosers within a system have the requisite information and empowerment to execute informed choices relating to educational futures. As both

Michelle and Liz referenced, poor and needy parents bear the brunt of off-rolling. As ‘choosers’ (Hindnes, 1986), not all parents feel sufficiently briefed to question the inclusion policies, the factors leading to exclusion or the alternative provision options available to them. After what may be an extended period of tension between school, child and family, the option of alternative provision or home-educating may be attractive when compared with the threat of continued friction or permanent exclusion. Parental barriers to engagement with their child’s school have been the focus of numerous studies, and Hattie’s (2009) metanalysis revealed the language of schooling as being a core source of disconnect. When placed alongside the current policy context, it is possible that parents with low socio-economic status (Hattie, 2009) find themselves barred from a complex system of academies, chains and free school which does not mirror their own experience of schooling, leading to their readiness to ‘cave in’ to the directives of the school to home educate or face formal exclusion. YouGov found that parents with low understanding of the current system are at high risk of being subject to pressure, and to accept an alternative pathway without fully understanding or asserting the needs or rights of their child (YouGov, 2020).

Though Helen’s comments from a secondary leadership perspective overlap on many levels with those of Liz in terms of the pressures of outcome measurements as potential drivers (Education Select Committee, 2018), their positioning on professional values differs in emphasis. Helen’s account refers to pupils causing an ‘irritation in the system’, which mirrors both Ball’s (2013) direct reference to and the Education Select Committee’s less blatant observation of the ‘economy of student worth’ (Ball, 2013, p. 3). Whilst Helen appeared to accept this reality more readily than Liz, both acknowledged the difficulty in maintaining inclusion throughout a child’s education. Pupil behaviour featured as a trigger for off-rolling in both cases, and it is impossible to ignore Hattie’s (2009) re-enforcement of negative behaviours as having a detrimental impact on peer learning. In the absence of directly applicable data for the triangulation between off-rolling, pupil behaviour and socioeconomic status, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions relating to the explicit commonalities in these accounts, though both the Education Selection Committee (2018) and Ball (2013, 2019) position the narrowing of the school curriculum, the increase in standardised testing and the death of vocational pathways such as BTEC as factors in the broader educational exclusion of young people within English secondary education. When faced with a dichotomous educational system, it is possible that pupils and parents are falling down the middle of the academic/vocational divide, rendering their choices less apparent and their futures insecure (Michelle).

Menzies and Baars (2015) question the notion that mainstream schooling should be the expected starting point for all pupils given the difficulty of some to survive in a complex institution such as a secondary school. Whilst Michelle and Liz both made reference to supportive inclusion practices such as effective transition and intervention, none of the three respondents discussed any in-school support for the behavioural problems they each signposted as a common determining factor in patterns of exclusion, which correspond with the increase in pupil numbers being referred to alternative provision (Education Select Committee, 2018). Ghafoori (2000) observed the positive impact of approaches such as ‘Cognitive Behavioural Therapy’ in enhancing pupils whose behaviour is problematic to the mainstream. As the Education Select Committee (2018) reported from interviews with pupils, extended periods of learning time are frequently spent in exclusion units without specialist intervention—valuable learning time which could be utilised to provide intensive, evidence-informed psychological and cognitive interventions to support inclusion and integration in mainstream learning environments (Ghafoori, 2000). This correlates with the recommendation for immediate and comprehensive assessment intervention for all pupils whose persistent and disruptive behaviour threatens their continuation in the mainstream (Parker *et al.*, 2016) as a means of heading exclusion off at the pass and empowering teachers via the careful and explicit identification of needs. Tragically, poor mental health rather than academic ability was identified by the study as the key determinant in whether a pupil struggles or flourishes with school (Parker *et al.*, 2016).

Conclusion

Having established that school performance outcomes are a driving factor in the increase of unofficial exclusion, we must turn to the groups of students who are most likely to find themselves ‘ghosted’ from school rolls, in transit between educational settings via the carousel of ‘managed moves’ and wasting valuable learning time disconnected from their schools (Education Select Committee, 2018). Whilst it is worth considering whether such specialist provision may be a more appropriate setting for pupils with identified behavioural needs (Gonzales *et al.*, 2004), this does not in any way mitigate against the sharp rise of formal, recorded exclusions described in the Education Select Committee Report (2018). Though its existence is acknowledged and condemned, the ‘Bill of Rights’ emerging from the report neither references nor makes recommendations to address unofficial exclusion, nor to secure direct accountability. The report appears to have ignored the ‘pressing need to involve parents from all social backgrounds involved in

proper school-based decision making’ by allowing the practice to be overlooked within a further dichotomy; those who are formally excluded and those who are not. Data collection on the phenomenon commissioned by Ofsted in 2020 reveals some valuable insights, though no tangible recommendations or actions have followed. We as an inclusive education sector are at risk of perpetuating a sense of lostness among students who are not viewed as being of high value (Ball, 2016) and whose identities are potentially shaped by the furtive labelling of non-belonging (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Parker *et al.*, 2016). There is a danger of the formation of a disempowered subgroup who develop a distinct identity by ‘making themselves obnoxious to the virtuous’ (Cohen, 155, p. 28) as a means of forging their own path through an opaque, confusing and fragmented educational system (Ball, 2018; YouGov, 2020). The role of school leaders dealing with long-term economic and austerity-driven pressures is particularly challenging. According to Menzies and Baars (2017), headteachers candidly reported the financial sense exclusion makes when faced with rising levels of complex needs (Gill, 2017), which have not been matched in a proportionate increase in school funding. Half-discussion and partial recognition of a ‘scandalous’ practice (Education Select Committee, 2018) without recommendations, and acknowledgment without action (YouGov, 2020) are wholly insufficient in ensuring a truly comprehensive and inclusive access to education by all pupils. Current political rhetoric pays little acknowledgment to the position of Bernstein (1996) and Menzies and Baars (2015) that sees state schools as large and complex social bodies. Rather than opting out of education, many students find the challenge of adjusting to ‘normal’ expectations impossible, compounded by other complexities (Menzies and Baars, 2015). It is time to move beyond staring at partial data sets and legislate with urgency to prevent the formation of a deficit mode of education (Matheson, 2004). We must continue to explore the most effective and empowering relationships between parents, schools and well-resourced alternative settings in providing a safe, secure (Menzies and Baars, 2015) education for the most vulnerable groups in society.

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