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The benefits of school exclusion: Research with headteachers in England

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Summary

This policy brief is based on the thematic analysis of interviews with 46 headteachers (HTs) regarding their views on whether or not there are benefits to school exclusion. Through thematic analysis, the findings showed a 50/50 divide of HTs who described benefits of the practice of school exclusion and those who acknowledge there was no benefit to the child, family, or school. The benefits shared included: to keep staff and other children safe, to give the child and caregivers time to reflect on the seriousness and consequences of their behaviour and to find external solutions. Those who proposed there were no benefits to school exclusion based their views on the belief they did not solve the behavioural difficulties but rather gave children a few days off school to enjoy themselves.

Introduction

The extent of school exclusions in England

'Fixed period' and 'permanent' school exclusions, were introduced by The Education Act (1986, c. 61) allowing the removal of a child from school if they were deemed 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, 2017).

Between 1995-96 and 2011-12 the DfE (2018) reported a downward trend in school exclusions that rose again in 2012-13. Later data from 2018-19 showed a marginal decrease of 11 permanent exclusions when compared to the previous year (DfE, 2020) with fixed period exclusion rising from 410,000 to 438,300. Furthermore, this most recent data highlighted those children designated as having special educational needs on (SEN) support were five times more likely to be permanently excluded, and 2.5 times for those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

Why should we care about school exclusions?

It is widely accepted that children 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; 2021b) and a short- and long-term detriment to their mental health and wellbeing and that of their wider family (Martin-Denham, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021a; 2021b). The

DfE (2017, p.6) state 'disruptive behaviour can be an indication of unmet needs. Where a school has concerns about a pupil's behaviour, it should try to identify whether there are any causal factors and intervene early in order to reduce the need for a subsequent exclusion'. The SEND code of practice (DfE and Department of Health (DoH), 2015, p.97) also requires 'a detailed assessment of need should ensure that the full range of an individual's needs is identified, not simply the primary need'. The **current body of works by Martin-Denham** (2020-2021) suggest that these statutory requirements are not consistently undertaken in schools leading to increasing numbers of school exclusions.

The benefits of school exclusion

Limited conclusions have been made as to the effectiveness of school exclusions, as there is scarce evaluation of these practices in academic research (Obsuth et al., 2017). The DfE (2017) statutory guidance on school exclusions makes no reference to the benefits, though it does state:

'Where a pupil has received multiple exclusions or is approaching the legal limit of 45 school days of fixed-period exclusion in an academic year, the head teacher **should** consider whether exclusion is providing an effective sanction (p. 11)'.

There is little historical evidence that exclusion improves behaviour in school (Skiba, 2000), and researchers have suggested that such practices fall short due to their reluctance to identify the child's underlying difficulties (Theriot, Craun and Dupper, 2009; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Martin-Denham, 2020c). Scenarios in which a child is excluded multiple times further illustrate the shortcomings of how exclusions are implemented in their current state.

Participants

There were 35 female HTs (76%) and 11 male HTs (24%). The HTs who took part in the research were all employed in schools in Sunderland (Table 1).

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	25	40%
Mainstream secondary	18	9	50%
Nursery school	8	4	50%
Special school	7	4	57%
Alternative provision	6	4	67%
Total	101	46	46%

Findings

Following thematic analysis, two themes were generated; **'benefits of school exclusion'** and **'no benefit to school exclusion'**.

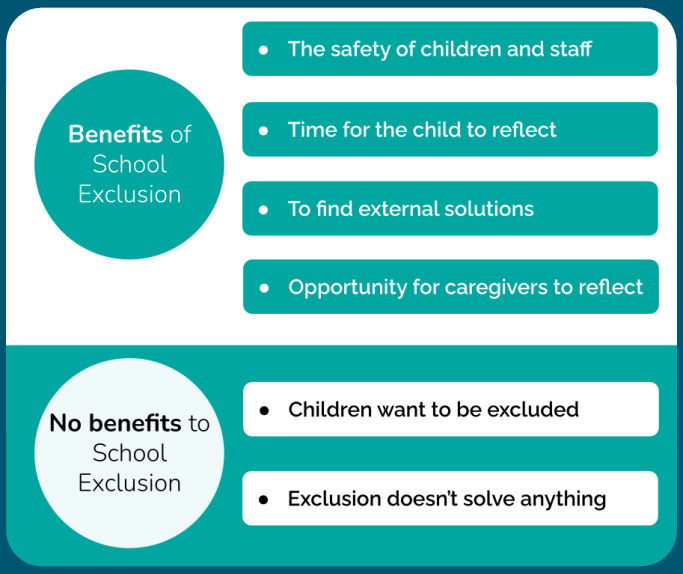

Fig 1: Themes and their components generated through thematic analysis.

Benefits of school exclusion

Half of the HTs (across all age phases) suggested that school exclusions did have benefits.

The safety of staff and other children

HTs reported that the main benefit of school exclusion was to keep their staff and other children safe. They felt concerned that allowing the child to remain in school endangered other students and staff, and that exclusion was the responsible course of action.

A primary HT claimed that exclusion was 'unfair terminology, because they've come to the end of the road in terms of health and safety.' Other primary HTs agreed that they excluded due to safety reasons as 'the absolute last resort', and 'the bottom line', with another adding:

'I feel very strongly about exclusions and I wouldn't exclude if I didn't think there was adequate reasons it would always be around safety. There are some children that we make a lot of allowances for and they have additional provision, but the benefit of exclusion in our context has been for the safety of themselves and the other children.'

Primary school HTs reported dangerous behaviour such as 'assault', 'biting', 'spitting' and 'horrendous aggression' when describing behaviour that they felt warranted exclusion. Secondary HTs also mentioned similar behaviours, and special schools recounted incidents of 'strangulation' and 'premeditated assault'.

The exclusions implemented by HTs also varied in length, therefore their aim also varied correspondingly. While longer fixed-period or permanent exclusions were implemented as a safety measure, some HTs used exclusions for different purposes. One common purpose was to give other children a 'break' or 'respite.' For example, one secondary HT suggested that exclusions could be used so that the student's classmates were 'not having their learning disrupted.' Another secondary HT remarked:

'School has to have its law and order; we also need to make sure that our children are looked after and safeguarded as best we can. Sometimes that does involve spending some time away from school for different parties - fixed term exclusion - it just allows an incident to die down.'

Across the interviews, HTs spoke about exclusion in terms of how the child's behaviour was impacting those around them. Secondary HTs indicated that other children's responses to the excluded child's behaviour ranged from 'stressed' to 'terrified'. A primary HT believed that exclusion could alleviate some of these negative impacts on other children:

'You're sat next to a child that is struggling for whatever reason and can be emotionally unpredictable, so that is going to put stress on you. So, the benefit of that child being removed is that there is a de-escalation of tension in the room.'

Time for the child to reflect

Most of the alternative provision (AP) HTs felt that fixed-period exclusion was a means for the child to learn that their behaviours were not acceptable by reflecting on what they had done. 'It's about the learning that that's not acceptable and giving them time to reflect.' There was an acknowledgement that they may not actually think about their actions: 'whether they do or not reflect, I don't know.' Another commented that there are children who find it too hard to control their impulses and behaviours, and the way they react, perceiving that having a school exclusion gives them space to think about their reactions.

A few AP HTs described that excluding a child would act as a deterrent to other children:

'I would use it, also it's for other children to see. This child has punched this child and that child knows we have dealt with it. Do I overuse it? I don't think so. But it's there and mainstream use it in the same way.'

'Other students see what's acceptable and not acceptable. They can see that there are consequences and fairness in the system.'

A primary HT also described using school exclusion to send a message to other children about the behaviour expectations in the school. They felt that the excluded child knows why this is necessary.

The primary HTs agreed with the AP HTs that a benefit of fixed-period school exclusion was that children would have time to reflect on behaviours and to see there were consequences for their actions. One said that:

'It would normally be two to three days to get through to the parent and the child and the class: yes, that really upset and hurt you all, and that behaviour cannot happen in school, and to start thinking about that this is not behaviour that is normal that can be condoned.'

The secondary HTs also indicated a benefit of fixed period school exclusion was that 'it gives them a chance to think about what they have done' and 'a chance to talk about what went wrong and talk about what we're going to do moving forward, to reflect on those negative behaviours.'

Most secondary HTs used exclusion to set an example to other children and deter them from non-compliance. 'It's a way of showing pupils that if you do something wrong or display negative behaviour, this is potentially what could happen' and 'to the school there's a benefit the other pupils see that as something they don't want to happen to them; it's a deterrent.' Others felt it was about setting an example:

'It's about setting a precedent, setting your expectations. If we don't permanently exclude, that is a bit like: why do we bother having rules and law and order? The purpose of a fixed term

exclusion is to reinforce your expectations.'

Another secondary HT agreed that some children test boundaries: 'There has to come a point where you say 'these are our boundaries and you're not going past them. I think that's probably the only benefit.'

To find external solutions

HTs across all types of schools used exclusions to allow them time and opportunities to seek external solutions, such as managed moves, and aid from external agencies.

Some HTs felt that exclusion allowed the family to seek solutions at another school that was better equipped to cope with the child's needs. One primary HT felt that persisting for so long with one child before exclusion was actually a missed opportunity:

'Everybody said, "How did you hang onto him for so long?" Behaviour provision could not meet his needs, and they put him on a part-time timetable. As a mainstream school, we hung on to him to the very end; there's opportunity for that transition to be right for him and that just did not work. He's in year eight now and is still not in full-time education.'

A secondary HT recalled receiving feedback from a child's new school after their own school's exclusion had led to an alternative placement. They concluded from this feedback that 'sometimes, a fresh start can help.' Another secondary HT explained that moving schools may be essential to the child's welfare, as they required 'specialist support.' The role that exclusions played in changing the child's school was unclear, with one primary HT suggesting that exclusions were 'crucial' to obtaining a specific placement for a child at their school. Another primary HT shared a similar experience, in which they recounted using a fixed-period exclusion to gain the attention of external services:

'It was successful in a funny sort of way, as it resulted in him getting a place at behaviour support for about two weeks.'

Primary HTs predominately used fixed-period exclusions to access external support. They had concerns that allowing a child to remain in school would further damage relationships with children and staff, and felt they needed support with managing the child's behaviours. One primary HT used the time the child was on a fixed-period exclusion to:

'Put some new strategies in place, consult other people think about what you can do differently and get something else in place and get started again, it's really a last resort more often than not.'

A secondary HT shared a similar approach: 'when I do use exclusion, some of those exclusions are about gathering evidence around EHCP and providing evidence that we cannot manage the child in a mainstream environment.' Similarly, a specialist HT concurred that: 'It is only beneficial as you were then able to get support from agencies. It's a way to a means. We needed intervention from other people.'

Opportunity for caregivers to reflect

AP, primary and secondary HTs frequently mentioned that they believed school exclusions (mostly fixed period) could help caregivers realise how serious the child's behaviours had become. They used phrases like 'drawing a line' and 'grabbed the parents' attention' when explaining how they believed exclusions impacted a child's parents. One primary HT elaborated that:

'I knew that Mum and Dad would be really shocked by the fact that I'd actually gone that far, but that made them sit up and take notice, so in a way, that did work. It turned them against us, but actually, it made them realise that he really did need extra help and it wasn't just us saying that he was being a little bit badly behaved.'

Another primary HT suggested that it would take a 2-3 day fixed period exclusion to really get through to the parent that their child's behaviour was unacceptable. Secondary HTs remarked that they hoped an exclusion would encourage the parents to 'reflect on their child's behaviour', with another suggesting that, unless the exclusion is 'really big' and 'really inconveniences the child or the family', they are unlikely to be effective.

No benefit to school exclusion

Fifty percent of the HTs said there was no benefit to excluding children from school. This included all four nursery school HTs, 50% of AP HTs, 48% of primary school HTs and 44% of secondary school HTs. The other 50% of HTs, while holding some reservations around exclusion, were able to list potential benefits and/or recalled using exclusions in their schools.

54% of female HTs and 36% of male HTs reported no benefits of school exclusions, however the sample size for males was small (n = 11). A chi-square crosstabulation was conducted to assess the statistical significance of this relationship, and no significant effect was found ($X2(1, 46) = 1.09$, $p = .297$). A larger sample size is required to arrive at a statistically informative inference.

Children want to be excluded

Some of the HTs that did not perceive exclusion to be beneficial felt that children wanted to be excluded, rather than stay in school. One HT minimised the impact of a temporary exclusion on a child as 'a couple of days off', adding that the impact on the parents would simply be that they would be able to have a 'lie-in.' Another HT suggested that children 'enjoy' being excluded, a view shared by two other HTs:

'It pains me to exclude some children because I know that that's what they want; they want to go home and have two to 10 days with their parents, depending on the type of parent that sending them home to.'

'Some of the students are poorly behaved deliberately in order to be excluded; they want to play on their Xbox, or be with their mum, or their mum wants them to look after a younger sibling.'

Exclusion doesn't solve anything

Some HTs expanded on their belief that there were no benefits to school exclusion by highlighting which facet of the child's situation it fails to impact. One HT claimed that it is not influential in 'changing

behaviour', while another stated that 'all that really happens is you just put the problem off.' One HT emphasised that exclusion results in social isolation:

'If you're excluded, you will never learn how to behave if you're part of the group. Other children might be upset with what you've done, however, you still need to be part of the group to learn how to behave.'

Another common argument made by HTs concerning the detriments of school exclusion was that schools merely used them to absolve themselves of responsibility. One HT felt that exclusions were often used for 'trivial reasons.' Two HTs felt that exclusions are encouraged by the government, with one stating:

'I think the government should have another look at this; it's encouraging schools to permanently exclude so that they were no longer responsible.'

Discussion

A common sentiment among HTs was that safety of staff and other children should be prioritised above all else, and they felt that the only way to achieve this was to exclude children exhibiting dangerous/problematic behaviours. It is understandable that schools are unable to manage children with challenging, violent and aggressive behaviours. If HTs are suggesting that the main benefit of school exclusion is to protect the safety of others, there needs to be clarification of whether the children have had a timely and detailed assessment of all needs (DfE and DoH, 2015) to identify causal factors to intervene early (DfE, 2017).

Given the evidence (Martin-Denham, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021a; 2021b), the multifaceted needs of children are not consistently assessed, identified or met in schools, and this results in dysregulated behaviours that are not understood. It could be argued that identifying needs would prevent the drive by schools to use exclusion to secure alternative provision for children unable to cope in mainstream contexts.

The view that a benefit of school exclusion is that allows the child time to reflect on their behaviours is contested. Martin-Denham (2020c) found that when excluded from school, children did not reflect on their behaviour but instead slept, completed schoolwork or played games. While many HTs were reluctant to use exclusion as a preventative measure for even the most extreme cases, some HTs were comfortable using it liberally, to the extent that they would use it to make a point to the child and/or the caregivers. It is of serious concern that some HTs described a benefit of exclusion was that it was used as a deterrent, to show other children the consequences of not adhering to school expectations.

HTs rarely expanded on their belief that school exclusions were not beneficial, however, some common arguments were made. Some teachers held ethical objections to school exclusion, while other negative attitudes towards such practices originated from a belief that they were not effective. HTs often employed exclusion to prevent further harm, rather than to change behaviour, and attempts to accomplish the

latter were often perceived to be futile. HTs described how exclusions did not change the child's problematic behaviour, a notion supported by research (Skiba, 2000), potentially due to the reluctancy to investigate underlying causes (Theriot, Craun and Dupper, 2009; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Martin-Denham, 2020-2021).

The fact that half of the HTs believed that school exclusion had no benefit correlates with research findings that, if anything, it compounds dysregulated behaviours (Martin-Denham, 2020-2021). The HTs in this study agreed that exclusion fails to impact positively on future behaviours, and instead just puts the problem on hold until they return to school.

National recommendation:

DfE to update statutory guidance on exclusion to change the terminology from 'should' to 'must', to ensure schools are obligated to address any underlying causes of behaviour, including the use of a multi-agency assessment.

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