

Managing exclusions in schools: in whose interests?

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Abstract

This paper considers briefly the policy and social contexts of student exclusions from schools and some of the common reasons for those exclusions, before moving on to explore some school policies and strategies that are used to enact exclusion and to encourage students at risk of exclusion to engage more successfully with schools. Interpreting these policies and strategies of exclusion is, however, problematic. Although they appear to foster rejection from the educational community for some young people struggling to position themselves in the organisational and social contexts which surround them, they are often portrayed as a means of promoting better general student engagement with schooling and of giving targeted help and support to particular students. Yet there are strong disciplinary elements in exclusion which tend to position the recipients as social outsiders to normal educational structures by depriving them of, through not giving full access to, the educational resources available to other students, so disadvantaging those excluded students in their struggles to gain a reasonable style of life as adults. It raises conundrums for school leaders about what values to implement and how and in whose interests, and which students' needs should be given priority in what ways.

¹**Note:** The original research 'Reasons for Exclusion from School' was carried out by Audrey Osler, Rob Watling and Hugh Busher of the Centre for Citizenship Studies in Education at the School of Education, University of Leicester, with help from Andy White and Ted Cole, and with a grant from the DfEE. The Report of the research is published as DfEE (2000) Research report RR244

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Introduction: school organisation and social justice

Understanding school organisations in the light of the values being implemented in them raises critical questions about in whose interests are those schools being governed and led. Leaders here are all those in posts, at what ever level they are in the school hierarchy, with formal responsibility for the work of other people. It includes support staff as well as teachers (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977)... Tensions and conflicts in meeting a wide variety of student needs, sustaining staff enthusiasm and facilitating staff learning and professional development

Social justice and the inclusion / exclusion agenda: Exclusionary processes as conduits of control, conduits of punishment, means of reducing social tension, or means of needs driven resource allocation...

A commonplace standpoint for understanding the management processes of educational organisations is from a rationalist or systems perspective [REF] that takes for granted the importance of making systems work. Even the more flexible variants of this, such as ambiguity theory and contingency theory [REF], only go so far as to acknowledge that leaders and managers have to be responsive to shifting environmental contexts and therefore cannot follow preconceived plans for practice without awareness of those contexts. Ambiguity theory allows slightly greater flexibility by recognising that leaders and managers will have to negotiate the achievement of the outcomes they desire rather than merely commanding it. So Burns (1978) has argued in favour of leaders having a variety of negotiative mechanisms, some of which rely on an exchange of personal wants and services, in a process he describes as transactional leadership, and some of which rely on the creation of shared values, which he has described as transformational leadership. More recent work on leadership by Hallinger and Heck (2001?), for example, and on distributed leadership by Gronn (2000) while elaborating the detail of this last approach do not fundamentally challenge it or offer an alternative perspective. The leader or manager is still assumed to have the authority to direct operations, even if it is in consultation with his or her followers, and to do so to meet what is claimed by socially dominant groups to be the greatest good of the greatest number, implementing an implicit Benthamite utilitarianism. In the Educational Leadership and Management literature followers are often elided with other teachers, while support staff, students and parents tend to get overlooked as actors in educational institutions. Indeed some of the recent rationalist literature that focuses on the application of Quality Management to education [REF] specifically excludes students from being actors in the educational institution, casting them instead as outside customers. Even in recent literature on school improvement (e.g Hopkins, 2001), the focus for leaders is working with other teaching staff to raise standards of learning and teaching – a rhetoric also found in school inspection reports in England, UK – apparently overlooking the part which students of what ever age play in helping to construct a school as an institution as well as in constructing the learning / teaching process.

However the importance of students as internal actors in the construction of a school and of schooling (Day et al, 2000; Ruddock and Flutter, 2002), and recent central government policy encouraging the development of school councils [REF], points to a re-emerging awareness of the importance of encouraging students to take a responsible part in the government of their schools, an awareness that was largely extinguished in the early 1980s. Work by Vincent (2003) among others has underscored the importance of teachers working in partnership with parents to help develop the successful education of students. While work by Begley et al (1999) and Riley et al (2001) has indicated the centrality of values to the developing work of school leaders at whatever level (from class teacher through middle leader to senior management and governors) and the need for schooling to be inclusive for all students.

Excluding students, parents and support staff as people with agency who play a part in the construction of a school's (or college's) organisational system and social processes makes it possible for a rationalist or systems perspective to ignore the micro-political nature of school processes that are discussed by Ball (1987), Reay (200?) and Benjamin (2002) among others and the negotiative policy processes of leadership in educational institutions analysed by Grace (1995). Dangerously it allows supporters of rationalist perspectives on leading and managing schools and colleges to make assumptions that leaders always take decisions that are in the best interests of the majority of the people for whom they are responsible and that those 'best interests' fit comfortably with sustaining the current system operating in an institution, i.e. maintaining its current social processes, its current distribution of power, and its existing sub-culture in which certain norms, values and identities are privileged over others. The last is often claimed by leaders to reflect the norms and values of the dominant macro-culture in which a school is located and which schools are expected to reflect as a result of various social and political pressures. It leaves shut the door through which lie questions about in whose interests are leaders' governing; what constitutes the interests of students and parents and how these can be manifested legitimately and reflected in a school's culture and decision-making processes; what is the nature and distribution of power in a school and how can learning communities of the sort discussed by Bottery (2003) among others be built and be inclusive of the students as well of the staff in a school; what constitutes social justice in an institution serving a wide diversity of students and communities?

An alternative critical perspective focuses on the micro-political and micro-cultural processes being carried out in schools by the people who make up such communities. These communities are probably more satisfactorily considered as organisations because their systems incorporate hierarchical authority structures [REF] in to which participants are allocated places by societal laws and contracts depending on their work skills and personal attributes. Membership of such communities is only partly a matter of choice even for their adult members: students under a certain age are required to attend, except in particular circumstances, and staff join schools to pursue work, the sites of which may be limited for them for various personal reasons, even it is work they have chosen as the most satisfying available to them at that point of time in their lives. Power is asymmetrically distributed in such organisations [REF] with more being accessible to those in more senior posts in the school hierarchy, although everybody, particularly when working in association with other participants (Busher, 2001) is able to exercise some influence in pursuit of what they would consider their legitimate aims. These include their needs to position themselves socially within the framework of the community that constitutes the school (Benjamin, 2002) as well as the broader community in which they live outside school.

The critical perspective leaves open the possibility of wondering in whose interests headteachers manage their schools and whether the values they try to project when doing so meet the needs of all students (and staff and parents, too) or whether they marginalize the actions and attitudes of some in

order to promote those of others which fit more closely with the preferred values and norms of the headteacher. He / she is likely to try to legitimate their preferences by comparing them with central and local government education policy and the views and values expressed by local community leaders, whether or not they are governors of the school. It also leaves open to question understandings and interpretations of students' behaviours and attitudes in school that take account of the various communities inside and outside school of which they have membership and the conflicting demands these might put upon them. It allows the distribution of power in a school and the manifestation of that in school decision-making systems to be considered as problematic, rather than taken for granted, and so raises questions about what constitutes social justice and equity in a school serving a wide diversity of communities and individual students' needs.

A critical perspective raises questions about school exclusions that a rationalist systems perspective ignores. In the latter, the concern is with maintaining the current system satisfactorily to meet the needs of the greatest number of students. Built into this is a notion of administrative justice [REF]: so long as the processes of decision-making are operated fairly then whatever decision is reached can be construed as a reasonable decision. A critical perspective raises other important questions: how understandings of the behaviour have been constructed by different parties involved with them, why some behaviours are constructed as misbehaviours while others are not (Foucault... Archaeology of Knowledge), how are those behaviours interpreted in the different communities to which a student belongs and why are some interpretations privileged in the school community, how the student and her / his parents or carers understand the administrative processes for managing those (mis)behaviours, and the extent to which they feel able to exert control within the administrative system that manages them so that they emerge with a sense of justice and dignity.

Whereas exclusion in a rationalist perspective can be seen as a reasonable ... in the alternative ... any exclusion has to be queried ... and considered in the light of how it promotes the personal development and growth of the parties involved, especially those participants being threatened with exclusion ... exclusion as a weapon of the system to coerce compliance of individuals / curtail their agency to fit within socially defined bounds of acceptable behaviour ... the problem is which society or sub-culture is doing the defining and is the main sub-culture to which the excludee offers her/his main allegiance

This paper draws on examples from 16 Secondary, Primary and Special schools in four LEAs in England, two of which were urban and two rural, that formed part of a study undertaken by Osler et al (2000) into the reasons for exclusion from school and how that process was managed by LEAs and schools. Some of these schools had high incidences of student exclusion while others had very low ones. Secondary schools were a mixture of rural, suburban, and urban. Primary and Special schools served either rural or urban catchment areas. LEA officers, headteachers, deputy headteachers, school governors and SENCOs were interviewed about the processes of exclusion in their institutions.

Inclusion: the policy contexts of student exclusions at national and local level

'circular 10/94 (DfE, 1994) defined two permissible forms of exclusion from school: Fixed term [fixed period] which allows schools to exclude a pupil for a limited period up to a maximum of 15

school days in any one term, and Permanent, following clear procedures involving the headteacher, governing body, parents, pupil and the LEA' (Osler et al, 2000: 16). In addition we found numerous examples of unofficial exclusions or unspecified absences, which some headteachers justified as creating a cooling off period for the students while alerting the parents that there was a behaviour problem. ACE (1993) noted that the statistics on exclusion from school did not include those children who had not been formally excluded but are out of school because they had been rejected by their school. We were told of cases where students were known to be absent without good cause but when they were in school they were constantly in trouble with teachers.

Recent legislation points to an agenda of inclusion ...[cite legislation] ... but some of it appears to be contradictory in its thrust. For example extending choice of schools only gives more choice to those who can take advantage of it, or who live in areas where realistic choice exists. National Curriculum is arguably exclusionary for some students, especially those with learning difficulties (Benjamin, 2002). Inclusion seems to be at a price of conformity to particular socially derived norms of behaviour that are put forward with the support of central government Lack of flexibility for teachers to respond to the local needs of students in their communities ... Difficulties of joined up practice between schools and other agencies, particularly for certain groups of children: looked-after; traveller; refugee and displaced children, where social problems are a major cause of problems that students may have with schooling

Social contexts of student exclusions: who is most at risk?

This section explores what seemed to be the underlying causes of exclusion, as compared to the actual events which triggered exclusions or exclusionary processes, and focuses on students social backgrounds. Most of the strategies developed by schools and LEAs – see below – only try to manage the trigger events ('headline reasons'), not the underlying causes. Underlying causes of student exclusion related strongly to conflicts between students' social backgrounds and the micro-cultural work they did to position themselves in their communities (Benjamin, 2002) and the social expectations of their schools.

Boys are more likely to be excluded than girls: 10 times more likely in Primary schools and 4 times more likely in Secondary schools. Gillborn (1998) says that the peak ages for exclusions from school are 14 and 15 years old, i.e. years 9-11 of compulsory schooling in England. However there is also a noticeable peak in Year 6, the last year of Primary schooling. African-Caribbean boys were generally over represented in the numbers of students excluded in proportion to their numbers in the school population, but in some urban communities other ethnic minority male students, notably those of Pakistani origin, were also over represented (OFSTED, 1996)

Education officers in several LEAs indicated that there were various social factors linked to exclusion. These included students in homes suffering family crises or disturbed social circumstances; students who were former refugees; students who lacked sufficient command of English to access adequately the curriculum; students who moved frequently between schools. A particular example of the last was students who were looked-after by local authority social services. In being transferred from one foster home to another their schooling was often disrupted, and if they were in a local authority home it was sometimes difficult for a school to know whom to contact about a particular student's academic achievement or social behaviour.

The child gets looked after by social services. They get moved. They get put with one foster family. They're moved again. Their schooling can be disrupted an endless number of times.

Nobody seems to be giving the model that education is something valuable, interesting, part of life ... and yet they're the children we need to be modelling how useful education is ... otherwise they become the parents of the next set of children who get looked after. (LEA officer)

Some LEA officers suggested that school transfer itself caused some students difficulties because of problems they experienced in adapting to the social expectations of their new schools.

I think they get lost [when they get to] secondary school and that's why children fail ... I've worked with a lot of Key Stage 2 / 3 link projects this year and I think that's actually crucial for children because the transition is not good at the moment ... It should be much more rigorous assessment not just of children's academic achievement but a monitoring of their behaviour in liaison with the schools they've just left (Deputy head, Primary school)

In one urban LEA Education Officers indicated that there was 38% rise in exclusions in 1997/98 amongst pupils who transferred from inner city Primary schools to suburban Secondary schools – parents often being encouraged to make this transfer because of the performance of the Secondary schools in the local League Tables.

A common strand across many of the schools was that problems with student behaviour, which eventually led to exclusion, often began with students' inabilities to access the curriculum successfully:

I think for the majority of children at high risk of exclusion because of their behaviour we can trace it back to a learning difficulty which is about being able to access the work or frustration at not being able to spell or read and often literacy problems (SENCO, Primary school)

A SENCO in a Secondary school commented:

We need more flexibility to choose and select courses which we feel meet the needs of our pupils (sic)

In one LEA an officer highlighted the need for:

Ensuring that how the curriculum is delivered is modern, is kept up to date, is vibrant and is targeted so that there is an opportunity for students who are experiencing learning difficulties ... have the same opportunity to access that curriculum as the 'high flyers' (rural LEA officer)

Common reasons for student exclusions from schools in the study

The reasons for which students were excluded from school need to be subdivided in various ways. Firstly they need to be subdivided into those stated or 'headline' reasons and those which are underlying, and often related to social conditions and learning opportunities. The latter are discussed in the previous section. Secondly they need to be subdivided into those reasons associated with fixed term exclusions and unauthorised absences and those associated with permanent exclusions.

The headline reasons for excluding students from school on a temporary or permanent basis show a certain similarity across the LEAs in this study, indicating a certain degree of cultural homogeneity about what counts as unacceptable social behaviour in a variety of different, and geographically separated communities in England.

One rural LEA asked its schools to notify it of exclusions under the following headings:

Bullying, damage to property, defiance, disruption, [use of] illicit substances, other (severe), physical abuse to pupils, physical abuse to staff, theft, verbal abuse to staff, verbal abuse to pupils.

Officers said the key areas were verbal abuse to teachers, assaults on other pupils, physical abuse to staff, disruption and defiance. Some of the aggression towards staff occurred when they were trying to control pupils. In another LEA the reasons given for excluding pupils in 1997/98 were:

Verbal abuse on staff (26.8%); Physical attack on staff (6.8%); verbal abuse to other students (7.1%); Physical attack on other students (23.1%); Indecent behaviour (1.5%); damage to property (6.2%); abuse of alcohol (0.4%); abuse of drugs (1.9%); abuse of solvents (0.3%); tobacco smoking (3.5%); theft (2.4%); other reasons (19.4%)

In one urban LEA an Education Officer suggested that physical aggression, much more than drugs was a common reason for exclusion. Indecent behaviour, usually by boys to girls, was an occasional cause. Arson was also cited as a major cause, but this covered everything from starting a major fire to a child seen playing with matches. In schools in the other urban LEA physical assault on students and staff and verbal abuse of staff and fellow students were perceived as the main causes of exclusion.

However the scale of behaviour that was considered socially unacceptable by powerful authority figures in schools, such as headteachers, and that led to students' exclusion, varied considerably from school to school. An urban LEA officer gave an example of one school that excluded students for stealing 50p. Other schools in rural and urban LEAs operated a non-exclusion policy and reported that they never excluded any students. As the proportion of schools that are permitted by central government to control their entry policies rises so is the variation in the scale of seriousness of behaviour that leads to students' exclusions likely to widen. The proportion of state schools able to control their entry doubled from 1988 to 1999, from 15% to 30% (West and Pennell, 2003:129), due to the increasing number of Foundation and Voluntary Aided schools, the emergence of City Academies in the early 21st century alongside the CTCs established by an earlier Conservative government in the early 1990s, and the continued influence of School League Tables on school recruitment.

There did not seem to be a difference in cause between temporary and permanent exclusions, but a difference in the scale of behaviour performed and a pattern of repeated and persistent behaviour that was deemed by teachers and senior staff in school, and repeatedly endorsed by school governors, as socially unacceptable.

Some school policies and strategies for managing exclusions

Systemic approaches – school behaviour policies (clarity about what constitutes acceptable behaviour by staff as well as students; clarity of what penalties / rewards, and how these apply to repeated student behaviours) ... the importance of midday supervisors

successful pastoral care that focuses on individual students' needs ... students sense of justice / fairness of treatment ... reducing confrontations between students and staff (e.g. uniform pass) and between students and students (e.g. bullying policy, student mentors) ... withdrawal areas / 'sanctuaries' that are supervised and 'timeout' opportunities for students under stress (Risk that these sites become 'sin-bins' rather than part of a managed process for helping students to cope with school) ... use of school support staff to offer counselling or other support to students and parents if SS are willing to be involved e.g. school nurse; librarian; caretaker – have the advantage over teachers that they are not obviously in an authority relationship with students ...

hearing student voices both formally (school council) and informally ... use of governors, particularly parent / community governors to diffuse situations & for hearing students' voices before a formal process of exclusion is begun ... getting students to own the problem and the possible solutions ...

Effective record keeping for monitoring students behaviour / needs / support... effective diagnosis of students' learning difficulties... records of truancy, absence, exclusion ...

Developing appropriate curricula (especially for SEN students)

I feel very strongly about the National Curriculum and this obsession with testing children – absolute obsession with it. And you're setting them up to fail ... I think there should be far more courses where children can just do the work and get a certificate. Why the hell do you have to keep testing them? ... They're individuals, not commodities (SENCO, Secondary school)

This view led on Deputy head of a Special school to comment

We're trying to concentrate very much on the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom because we the feeling is that if the quality of learning and teaching is right and relationships with children is right then children are far more likely to be successful. And so in terms of our development plan, in terms of our staff training, we're very much looking at people improving and developing their craft of the classroom technique, which includes as part of that managing behaviour in a pro-active way ... we also have a school mentoring scheme where class teachers are mentored in terms of their classroom practice ... from headteacher to NQTs ... so we each have an individual mentor ... who might help us [in] our discussions of managing groups of individual children

need to give adequate support to staff (especially teachers) to help them with the difficult students; need to give staff training on how to work successfully with such students ..

Students with inadequate command of English to access the curriculum successfully
Involving parents – in behaviour management, but also in curriculum development

Partnerships –

- Multi-agency working;
- school /LEA;

- school / school (or college)

PRUs (distant to a school, but also on-site units) ... difference of function of PRU provided by LEA and distant from a school, and on-site centres that remove students from classrooms but not from school site so not reducing potential confrontations during non-lesson times at school. Risk that on-site centres become a 'sin-bin' rather than part of a managed process for helping students to cope with school.

The Pupil Referral Unit runs a special intervention programme for pupils thought to be at risk of exclusion ... for pupils in Years 7, 8, 9 who are identified as being at risk of exclusion. Decisions on suitability are made by a panel after a referral by the school and only with the approval of the parents and the pupil. After a two week observation period in their own school, the pupil and the parents have a chance to meet PRU staff, followed by a six-week placement in the PRU where the focus is on PHSE, behaviour, social skills, and interactions with other pupils and teachers. Finally there is a stage of re-integration back into the original school, with support from the PRU, the Educational Psychologist and the Educational Social Worker. This programme is centrally funded by the LEA

Working with the temporary and permanently excluded pupils:

Working with the permanently excluded was in some ways less of a problem for the schools in this study because those students passed out of their care, either to that of the LEA, which used PRUs to give some temporary part-time education to the students, or to that of other schools. Some schools in this study noted that they frequently received students excluded from other schools, particularly if they were Special schools concerned with students with EBD.

However staff in several schools noted that they lacked the staff to follow students who were temporarily excluded. So once students were sent home on fixed-term exclusions there was nobody apart from their parents to help them with any school work that they had been set.

Unofficial exclusions and unauthorised absences

Ethnic minority students

Looked after children

Refugee and traveller children

Interpreting these policies and strategies: Conduits of control, conduits of punishment, means of reducing social tension, means of needs driven resource allocation, or means of facilitating the engagement of disaffected students with schooling?

Conduits of control – drawing on Foucault (197x? Discipline and Punish) that practices can be sites where as well as conduits or means where by some people exert power over other people. Exclusion

as a means of controlling those students who are harming or threatening to harm other students and / or staff. Exclusions as a means of controlling those students which agents of authority in society, such as the police, have difficulty controlling....

Conduits of punishment – depriving students of access to activities or resources they like, e.g. preventing them sharing time with friends

The conundrum for school leaders: Using power wisely: What values to implement and how and in whose interests, and which students' needs should be given priority in what ways.

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Inclusion: the policy contexts of student exclusions at national and local level

Social contexts of student exclusions: who is most at risk?

Common reasons for student exclusions from schools in the study

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Interpreting these policies and strategies: Conduits of control, conduits of punishment, means of reducing social tension, means of needs driven resource allocation, or means of facilitating the engagement of disaffected students with schooling?

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REASONS FOR EXCLUSIONS

Can be subdivided:

stated or 'headline' reasons v. underlying (often related to social conditions).

reasons associated with fixed term exclusions and unauthorised absences

reasons associated with permanent exclusions.

Headings used by a rural LEA to categorise exclusions from schools:

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Some school policies and strategies for managing exclusions (I)

Systemic approaches – school behaviour policies (clarity about what constitutes acceptable behaviour by staff as well as students; clarity of what penalties / rewards, and how these apply to repeated student behaviours) ... the importance of midday supervisors

successful pastoral care that focuses on individual students' needs ... students sense of justice / fairness of treatment ... reducing confrontations between students and staff (e.g. uniform pass) and between students and students (e.g. bullying policy, student mentors) ... withdrawal areas / 'sanctuaries' that are supervised and 'timeout' opportunities for students under stress (Risk that these sites become 'sin-bins' rather than part of a managed process for helping students to cope with school) ... use of school support staff to offer counselling or other support to students and parents if SS are willing to be involved e.g. school nurse; librarian; caretaker – have the advantage over teachers that they are not obviously in an authority relationship with students ...

hearing student voices both formally (school council) and informally ... use of governors, particularly parent / community governors to diffuse situations & for hearing students' voices before a formal process of exclusion is begun ... getting students to own the problem and the possible solutions ...

Effective record keeping for monitoring students behaviour / needs / support... effective diagnosis of students' learning difficulties... records of truancy, absence, exclusion ...

Some school policies and strategies for managing exclusions (II)

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