CES Briefing

Understanding school exclusion: what can we learn from a home international comparison?

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Children and young people excluded from school have lower than average educational outcomes and are more likely to experience 'deep exclusion' with severe long-term consequences for all aspects of their lives in the future. Exclusion is not random but is associated with factors such as additional support needs, ethnicity, gender and social class, resulting in a layering of disadvantage. Rates of formal exclusion and suspension differ significantly across the home nations of the UK, for example, England has very high rates in contrast to Scotland where rates are low. This Briefing draws on recent research to consider the contexts, causes and consequences of exclusion and what can be learned from a 'home international' analysis of exclusion across the nations of the UK.

- Exclusion is often a factor in maintaining and even worsening existing disadvantage and inequalities
- Rates of temporary exclusion rose sharply in England after 2008/9 in contrast to a dramatic decrease in Scotland and to a lesser extent in Wales. Rates in Northern Ireland have been consistently low
- Rates of permanent exclusions follow the same pattern as temporary exclusions in each nation. Any decrease in rates of permanent exclusion did not result in higher rates of temporary exclusion
- Non-official exclusion may well be increasing but we lack data on this
- Differences in the socio-political and policy contexts in the four nations, especially the focus in England on performance and attainment helps explain the variation in official rates
- The most common reasons for exclusion are similar and deeply entrenched across the UK nations
- Austerity and underfunding have left schools and support services as 'stressed systems' and has increased financial and other pressures on many pupils and families
- In all four nations, it is the same groups of young people who are disproportionally more likely to be excluded and this is true even when exclusion rates are low
- Evidence is robust on the negative impact of exclusion on young people across a range of short- and long-term outcomes
- Contrary to long held assumptions, emerging evidence shows that exclusion is not in the interests of other non-excluded pupils but may be detrimental to their attainment and engagement
- Evidence is lacking on the nature and longer-term impact of alternatives to exclusion
- Exclusion is a barometer of the education systems in the UK nations in which schools can feel 'forced to' exclude young people because they lack the resources and training to meet their needs
- To address exclusion, the research highlights the need to pay attention to training and resourcing of school staff; data and research; and real evidence-based policy making.

Introduction

School exclusion has been a topic of rising interest over the past few decades. Exclusion from school has devastating long-term consequences for many of the young people concerned with severe negative consequences for their quality of life, well-being and future life chances, including their physical and mental health, involvement with the justice system, employment and housing. It is recognised that students who are already disadvantaged or vulnerable are more likely to be excluded so that exclusion from school is often a contributing factor in maintaining and even worsening existing disadvantage and inequalities. Exclusion also has a wider impact on parents and families, on other pupils, staff and the wider school ethos and has economic consequences. Exclusion is enormously expensive at every level: the individual, the school, the local authority and the wider economy and society.

All four nations in the UK permit the use of school exclusion in law as well as alternatives to exclusion, often framed as beneficial for the individual pupil as well as the school attended. All four use targeted funding, target setting and school inspection regimes as levers for improvement. Despite this, rates of formal exclusion and suspension differ significantly across the home nations. These differences offer an invaluable opportunity to gain a greater purchase on school exclusion by investigating the issue in each of the home nations which share broadly similar social, economic and cultural contexts ie a 'home international' comparison.

This Briefing draws mainly on a major four-year study - the Excluded Lives project that has used the home international approach to investigate policies, practices and costs of formal, informal and illegal school exclusions across the four nations of the UK.

Exclusion from school can take many different forms and a variety of terminology is used across the UK nations. Fundamentally, school exclusion is those processes by which schools take young people out of the normal learning environment in a primary or secondary school or other kinds of educational settings. This Briefing mainly considers official temporary and permanent exclusion but also refers to unofficial forms of exclusion. For brevity, the terms 'exclusion' and 'excluded' are used in this Briefing to cover all types of exclusion.

Different rates of exclusion across the UK nations

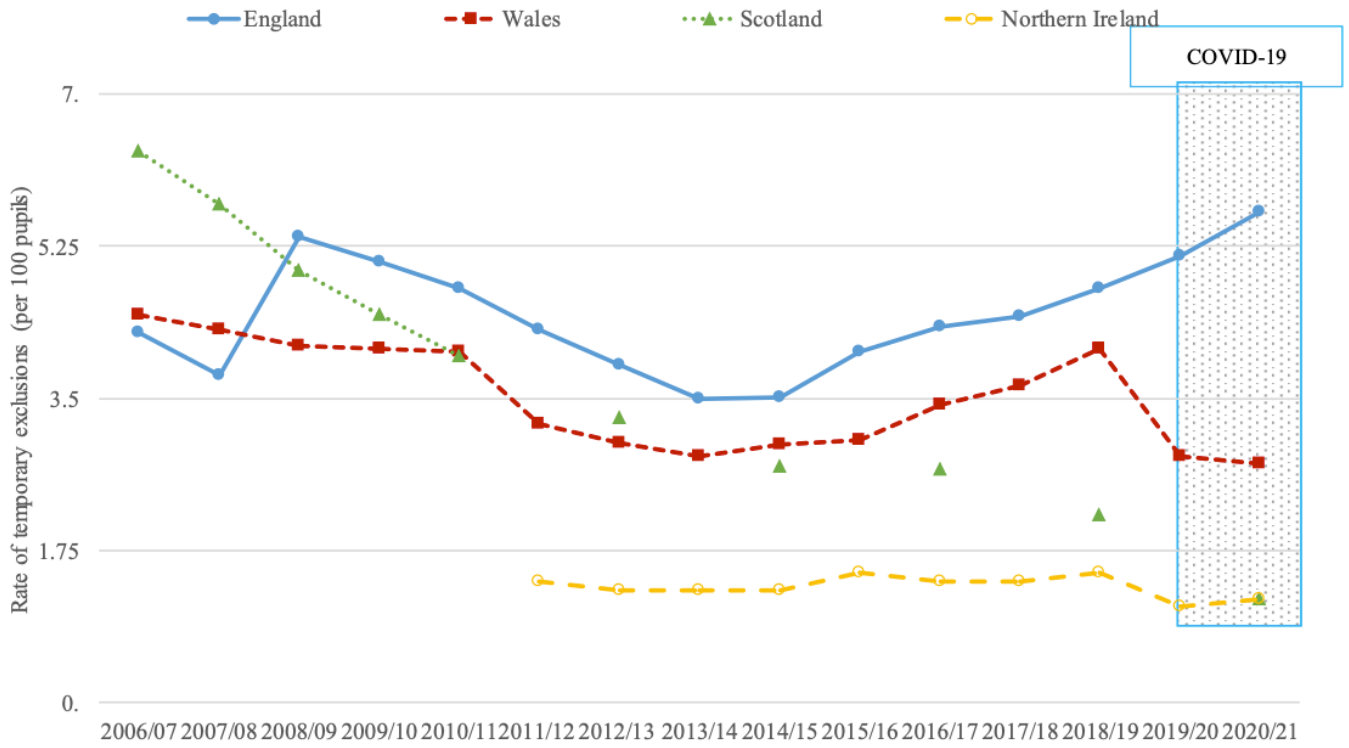
It might be expected that exclusion (and the exclusion rates) across the UK nations would be a well-researched area but surprisingly little comparative work has been done, despite the opportunities for mutual learning this would offer. One of the early tasks of the Excluded Lives study was to investigate and compare exclusion rates in the UK nations. Figure 1 shows the rates of temporary exclusion from 2006/7 to 2020/21; this is the rate of exclusion per 100 pupils to enable comparison across the nations despite the differences in pupil numbers. The data does include the emergency period of the Covid pandemic though caution is needed in extrapolating from data over this period given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic.

In Northern Ireland, official rates were very low and stable. Elsewhere rates changed considerably. In 2006/7 they were relatively high, especially in Scotland (0.64 per 1000) while England and Wales had similar rates (0.43 and 0.45 per 1000 respectively). Scotland saw a dramatic reduction in temporary exclusion rates over time such that by the end of the period it had very low rates indeed (0.1 per 1000). This was not the case in England which experienced a sharp rise in 2008/9, then a drop but a steady increase from 20014/15 so that by 2018/19 it had the highest rates of exclusion in the UK.

Rates of permanent exclusion were very much lower than temporary exclusions rates but the same pattern is evident with higher rates in England (7,894) than in Scotland (3) and Wales (246) (comparable figures are not available for N Ireland). The trend over the period for permanent exclusions mirrors that of temporary exclusions in each nation. Our study demonstrates that decreasing rates of permanent exclusion did not lead to higher rates of other kinds of exclusion.

Figure 1: UK Rates of Temporary Exclusion 2006/7 to 2020/21

(from Tseliou et al. (2023))



Who is excluded and why?

Despite differences in rates of exclusion across the UK, the reasons for temporary and permanent exclusion and who is more likely to be excluded are remarkably similar.

The most common reasons for exclusion are:

- Persistent disruptive behaviour (England)
- Persistent infringement of rules' (NI)
- General or persistent disobedience (Scotland)
- Persistent disruptive behaviour (Wales)

Regardless of which nation they live in, the risk factors for exclusion are the same. Across the UK, young people are more likely to be excluded if they:

- are male (young women are more likely to be absent than excluded)
- live in a deprived neighbourhood
- are entitled to free school meals
- come from certain minority ethnic backgrounds
- are care experienced
- have low attainment
- are poor attenders
- have special or additional educational needs

Even when rates of exclusion fall, this disproportionality in who is excluded persists and has remained constant over time.

The impact of the policy context on rates of exclusion

What might be driving these differences in exclusion rates? The Excluded Lives research has investigated the socio-political and policy contexts in each country, including the policy discourses around exclusion (Duffy et al 2024, McCluskey et al 2019, Power and Taylor 2024, Tawell and McCluskey, 2022). A contrast is evident between England, where there is a focus on behaviour and a more punitive approach, and the other three nations where the emphasis is more on well-being, the rights of the child and nurturing positive relationships (Figure 2). The study highlights the impact of the culture of performativity in England that stresses exam results and league tables, where competition is seen as necessary to drive up standards of attainment and funding arrangements are tied to performance – all of which can act to discourage more inclusive approaches (Cole et al 2019). In this context performance tends to be positioned in opposition to inclusion. The variety of school funding models, management, roles and responsibilities in England can make a comprehensive and coordinated response to issues related to school exclusion more difficult than elsewhere.

Figure 2 Key features of the policy context in the UK nations

England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Government control should be minimal	*[unclear]*	Good government is good for you	Good government is good for you
Cultural restorationism	Cultural restorationism/progressivism	Progressivism	Progressivism
Diversification	Diversification	Universalism	Universalism
Competition is necessary to drive standards	Competition is necessary to drive standards	Cooperation is better than competition	Cooperation is better than competition
Challenge professionals	Trust professionals	Trust professionals	Trust professionals
Ethic of consumerism	Ethic of participation	Ethic of participation	Ethic of participation
Greater equality of opportunity	*[unclear]**	Greater equality of outcome	Greater equality of outcome

** Comment on the policy landscape in Northern Ireland is necessarily limited due to the frequent suspensions of government in recent years.*

Schools as stressed systems in a time of austerity

Exclusion does not happen in a vacuum. Today's children and young people have spent their entire schooling career in a time of austerity economics with gross underfunding of schools and other parts of the education system. Schools are stressed systems with staff under immense pressure trying to educate and support young people in underfunded facilities, lacking the necessary resources (Sibieta, 2024)

At the same time, austerity and rising living costs mean that young people are in desperate need of more support to enable them attend and to thrive at school. Research on the cost of the school day has highlighted the stresses that young people and their families experience, that can make it difficult to enable them to even attend (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). Covid and its deepening99 impact on schools and support services has added a further level of stress to the system. We need to acknowledge these broader contexts when thinking about reasons for exclusion.

The negative impact of exclusion on all young people

The evidence is robust on the impact of exclusion on young people, many of whom are already vulnerable:

- missed learning- academic, formal and informal, social and personal
- missed opportunity for adults in authority to model productive ways to resolve difficulties
- reduces pupils' engagement rather than increases it
- takes away what is often a safe space for many children where support can be accessed
- poorer educational outcomes

- increases time available for criminal activity and may exacerbate delinquent behaviour
- social exclusion in adult life

There is clearly a high cost for those excluded but what about the other pupils - surely exclusion is in the interests of the other pupils in the class? But there is a growing body of evidence from the US that these assumptions may well be wrong, that exclusion has detrimental effects on the whole school, and that:

- support for zero tolerance approaches is associated with higher exclusion rates and lower feelings of safety
- higher levels of exclusion in schools over time negatively affect the academic attainment of non-suspended students; recent evidence suggests a causal relationship
- negative educational outcomes for excluded students are not accompanied by any improvements to their peer's outcomes or the school's climate
- the evidence does not support claims that removing misbehaving students from the classroom is necessary to deter others from similar behaviour or to ensure that their peers are able to learn and feel safe withing their school.

These findings from the US suggests that we need to think more carefully about the use of exclusion and its impact on the whole school community here in the UK.

An incomplete picture

We have good statistics about official levels of exclusion but this is only part of the picture. We do not know about the different ways unofficial exclusion may be happening: hidden exclusion, internal exclusion and unlawful exclusion. As policy has focused on reducing official exclusion, it is likely that the use of other kinds of exclusion is increasing – but we do not know.

Similarly, we do not know enough about the extent and impact of other related processes such as use of support hubs, inclusion bases or part-time timetables. These may be helpful for the young person at the time but we lack an overview of their use. We do not know what kind of patterns and trends are evident, for example, whether or not there are the same patterns of disproportionality found in the official exclusion figures, the longer-term impacts of these kind of processes, that are intended to support young people.

Conclusions

The comparative approach of the Excluded Lives study has revealed striking differences and similarities in exclusion across the nations of the UK. The official rate of exclusion is markedly different in England from those in the other nations. Part of the explanation for the variation in exclusion rates lies in the different policy contexts of each nation, demonstrating the extent to which policy matters. It is likely that unofficial exclusion rates are also different in the four nations but we lack data on this.

Nevertheless, despite differences in levels of exclusion, it is the same young people who are more likely to be excluded and these disproportionalities persist even when national exclusion rates decrease. Equally, the reasons for excluding young people are very similar in each nation and have persisted over time. Yet all the evidence indicates that school exclusion is ineffective: not only does it has far reaching negative consequences for those excluded, emerging evidence indicates negative impacts on their peers, school staff and the school community as a whole. Exclusion is a problem for all four nations and there is a very strong argument for thinking about ways we should be working much more closely together to address it.

In many respects, exclusion is a barometer of the condition of our education systems, systems that are increasingly under stress. There is an urgency about what we do next and this is not simply about exclusion but about how we ensure a successful and effective education system. It is given increased importance as schools endeavour to meet the needs of the so-called 'Covid generation' of children at different developmental stages who have much more complex needs than we ever expected teachers to have to face. We had a stressed system before Covid but the pandemic has exacerbated this.

The research points to a system where schools feel they are forced to exclude a child when they do not want to because they cannot meet their needs. There is strong research evidence about approaches such as restorative practices that can be successful but only when well resourced.

If we are to address the issue of exclusion, the research highlights the need to pay attention to training and resourcing; data and research; and real evidence-based policy making. It requires:

- mandatory training AND ongoing support for pastoral care/guidance teachers within a UK wide framework
- whole school approaches and well-resourced support at point of need
- routinely collected data at national and UK level to ensure clear set of parameters for measuring change and challenging inequalities.
- data linkage to prioritise inter-sectional analysis in relation to different types of exclusion, and in relation to identified groups of children known to be at risk
- robust research to inform decision-making as a norm.

About this Briefing

This Briefing is based on the public lecture given by Professor Gillean McCluskey at Moray House School of Education and Sport on 6th February 2024. It was the sixth Memorial Lecture in honour of the late Professor David Raffe, former director of CES. The lecture is available at https://media.ed.ac.uk/media/Understanding+school+exclusionA+what+can+we+learn+from+a++home+international+comparisonF/1_wgycv1ak

The lecture drew on the 'Excluded Lives' study (2019-2024) - a multi-disciplinary project across the four nations of the UK led by the Department of Education at the University of Oxford in partnership with the universities of Oxford, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Queen's Belfast, and the LSE. It was funded by the ESRC Grant ES/S015744/1. See https://excludedlives.education.ox.ac.uk/.

CES Briefings

CES Briefings are edited by Dr Cathy Howieson. All Briefings can be downloaded free from our website.

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