Jackie Ward

On the Fringes

Preventing exclusion in schools through inclusive, child-centred, needs-based practice

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And finally, thanks to all the lovely schools I have worked with, including my PRU, for the marvellous experiences, including the frustrations, which have informed this book.

Preface

An 8-year-old boy was the inspiration for writing this book. Permanently excluded from his mainstream primary school, he came to our pupil referral unit (PRU) where he stayed for about a year before moving on to a school for children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties. John was a 'naughty' boy who struggled to cope in the classroom. He loved playing with his friends but found it difficult when they did not do what he wanted them to. He was able to access learning, but only on his terms. If he felt thwarted he would scream and shout and lash out indiscriminately at both children and adults and it took him a long time to calm down. His teachers were becoming desperate as he would often destroy school property along the way. When John came to us, he initially settled well in a class of eight children, supported by at least two adults at any given time, but before long he started to display the behaviours which were so challenging for his mainstream school.

John was autistic. He had no formal diagnosis but it was clear to us that this lay at the heart of his difficulties. His need to control was part of his condition and he was having major sensory meltdowns when this did not happen. He had complex underlying needs and required a referral to the paediatric service for further investigation. This should have happened as soon as he started having difficulties, but it took until he arrived at the PRU. As deputy head and special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) it was my duty to ensure that the children in our care received appropriate help and support, and many of our children needed statementing and sometimes a placement in specialist provision. As a regular participant in edu-Twitter debates, I know that assigning 'labels' to children can be seen as controversial but I am a pragmatist; at this moment in time there is no way of getting

pupils the help they need without one. An education, health and care plan (EHCP) (what was once called a statement) has to include evidence taken from medical and educational sources and no child can access additional funded help in mainstream or specialist provision without one.

However, I know that the biggest challenge we face is giving our vulnerable children the support and strategies they need to help them develop life skills. As a very wise teaching assistant (TA) from the PRU once said to a child who was rhyming off a long list of his diagnoses, 'No one will ever see these written on your back … you need to find a way to deal with them.' An excluded child, whatever their issues, certainly does *not* need a free pass to behaving badly and, in my opinion, we need to ensure that strategies for emotional regulation and self-management are firmly in place, as lacking these skills leaves them at a disadvantage – both now and, especially, as an adult.

John eventually settled in our PRU. Pupil numbers were small and the adults were skilled and able to give him strategies to cope in a world which was challenging for him. John was hypersensitive to noise – not if it emanated from him, however – and his sensory meltdowns were distressing, both for him and for the people around him. These became more infrequent, although it was plain that he would need a similar environment throughout his education in order to reach his full potential; a return to mainstream would not be the best thing for him. In the course of his time with us he got a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), or autistic spectrum condition (ASC) as some prefer to call it, and as I will throughout this book. It is indeed a condition, and a lifelong one. He was then offered a place at the local SEMH school, with the support of an EHCP in place. PRUs are only intended to be used for short-term placements – we used to be referred to as a short-stay school, which I think is much

better than saying a 'unit'. A unit sounds penal, whereas the term 'school' reminds us that the children are with us to carry on their education whilst learning how to manage their underlying conditions and behaviour.

Towards the end of the summer term in 2016, I was asked to deliver a workshop about exclusion at a local conference and I received permission to interview John and use his words in my presentation. I am afraid I broke down in tears at that point. I will be exploring his views in more detail later in this book but the words that haunt me most are the ones he wrote in my memory journal at the end of the year. I was taking early retirement from the PRU and setting up as an independent behaviour and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) consultant as I wanted to work more closely with children in mainstream settings to prevent exclusion where possible. The children and staff wrote some lovely comments in the journal. John's said, 'hope you help children get back to mainstream school'. Cue more tears!

This book is my personal account of how a culture of exclusion is failing our young people, and how their lives are affected as a result. It is not meant to be an edu-research piece; I will leave that to those more qualified in the field than myself. I pride myself on being solution-focused, as a great head once inspired me to be, and I hope that in the course of this book I can inspire others with strategies to help some of our most vulnerable children, who can otherwise seem destined to remain on the fringes of society.

I do draw on facts or figures here; however, I am much more focused on real lives than dry data. Indeed, it is an emphasis on the latter that has sadly been the downfall of many of our young people. At the heart of this book lie human stories rather than statistics. I am also not setting out to make a particular political point as I've concluded that all governments

tend do what is expedient for them, which is often also the cheapest option. My passion is for our children, and I want to help them as much as I possibly can – this book is dedicated to them.

Contents

List of acronyms

ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

ASC – autistic spectrum condition

ASD – autistic spectrum disorder

CAF – common assessment framework

CAMHS – child and adolescent mental health services

CYP – child/young person

EAL – English as an additional language

EHA – early help assessment

EHCP – education, health and care plan

EP – educational psychologist

EYFS – early years foundation stage

FSM – free school meals

HLTA – higher level teaching assistant

IBP – individual behaviour plan

IEP – individual education plan

LEA – local education authority

NAS – National Autistic Society

NEU – National Education Union

ODD – oppositional defiance disorder

OT – occupational therapy

PDA – pathological demand avoidance (a form of ASC)

PPA – planning, preparation and assessment (time given to teachers in the school day for this purpose)

PRU – pupil referral unit

PSHE – personal, social and health education

SALT – speech and language therapy

SATs – standard attainment tests

SEMH – social, emotional and mental health

SEN – special educational needs

SENCO – special educational needs coordinator

SEND – special educational needs and disabilities

SLCN – speech, language and communication needs

SPD – sensory processing disorder

SpLD – specific learning difficulty

TA – teaching assistant

TAF – team around the family

TESS – Traveller Education Support Services

Introduction

If I had to sum up my professional mantra, I'd say, 'Be solution-focused, but remember the children are not the problem.' Schools are faced with a harsh reality when attempting to access SEND provision, address behavioural issues and, ultimately, prevent exclusions. The system as it stands is beset with problems, but the children are not it. I know there are no easy answers but I do feel that much more can be done by individual schools to help the vulnerable children in their care and ensure that they are not on the fringes for life.

I came late to teaching – I was a mature student, beginning my degree course when my son was a baby and then following it up with a PGCE. My career commenced in pre-national curriculum days and teachers were basically allowed to choose what they did as long as they taught maths and English. In my early days of teaching, there was the freedom to cater for the individual and let them learn at a pace that was right for them.

Unless a child had a physical condition, special educational needs (SEN) were largely unrecognised in the way they are today – for instance, diagnoses of ASC and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and concerns surrounding mental health, were far less common. There were special schools and schools for children with behavioural difficulties, but the processes for moving children into these were less formalised than they are now. Statements existed but few parents and teachers knew how to get them before they became enshrined in the 1981 Education Act.[1] Over the years, as procedures became more embedded in schools, there was much more inclusivity in mainstream and I feel I was a front-runner in terms of getting support for children who needed it via help from paediatric consultants and the statementing process.

Behaviour was similar to what it is now and, yes, there were disruptive children. However, I would argue that there was a greater expectation for teachers to 'manage' their classes, and I even encountered some heads who would tell new staff that it was their responsibility to sort out their classes. Exclusion was unheard of, although I did know of one child who spent some time in a specialist unit – this was before PRUs came into being in 1993 – until he was able to reintegrate back into school. It was only after the advent of Ofsted that heads started to look at whole-school behaviour policies and adopted the collective approach which is commonplace today.

I would suggest that schools have become far more prescriptive since I first started teaching, with a narrowing of the curriculum and of tolerance towards individual differences and needs. This is certainly part of the problem. I am not in possession of 'miracle cures' which solve every issue, but hope that I give a flavour of what *can* be done, despite the bureaucratic and financial obstacles which seem to stand in the way of success. I hope that schools will strengthen inclusive practices and have the confidence to employ strategies which contribute directly to a positive ethos with regard to SEN and exclusion. I will be referring to SEN throughout as these conditions can often be hidden, whereas disabilities are often more visible or evident.

I will be emphasising the many ways in which exclusion impacts on a child's self-esteem and life chances, leaving them on the margins of our society. I will detail how schools can be solution-focused in preventing this. However, before we look at these damaging effects, and ways to circumvent them, we first need to look at the mechanisms and systems as they stand. As such, I will begin with an analysis of the facts and figures to explore what is happening in schools, and by looking at the legalities of exclusions. As I've said, I think lived experiences say more than statistics can, so I'll

be exploring exclusion from various points of view, drawing heavily on my experience within the system. Alongside this, I will examine exclusion procedures and the SEND Code of Practice in depth, to examine pre-emptive approaches. I will particularly be highlighting the role of early interventions in detecting underlying SEN and medical needs, as, in my experience, these are often at the core of the behaviours that lead to exclusion.

I hope to reach out to parents, educators and other concerned parties and implore them to look at a bigger picture, which has the child at its heart. We always need to remember that for every statistic, there is a real child whose future is at stake. Of crucial importance is the role of parents in minimising exclusions, as is listening to pupil voice – both are vital in helping schools to be solution-focused.

First and foremost, this book reflects my personal journey over 25 years of working with children, parents and schools. I draw on a rich seam of knowledge and experience in helping those on the fringes of education and society, and have seen what I am suggesting work. I am very passionate about helping children and young people but we need to understand the context in which that help takes place. We need to look at what came before and consider what may come after – in many ways this book is just the starting point for future debate.

Notes

1 See http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/60/contents.

Chapter 1

Exclusion facts and figures

I'm not a fan of using data as the sole basis to make important decisions that affect children's lives, as it is too open to manipulation by decision-makers to suit their own ends. Figures can be massaged to fit just about any situation, often dependent on subjective opinion rather than dispassionate fact. Yet because we place collective trust in what data can tell us and use it to inform policy, it does have an impact on practice and, ultimately, people's lives. As Mike Schmoker says, 'Things get done only if the data we gather can inform and inspire those in a position to make a difference.'[1] So, whilst we must beware the limits of data as a measure of individual lived experience, we must also be aware of the ways in which it shapes decision-making, policy and, thus, children's lives.

What is the data on exclusions telling us?

Whilst this book is written from an unapologetically personal viewpoint, it is of course important to consider a certain amount of data in order to see the wider picture. In July 2017, the Department for Education published the previous year's annual figures for permanent and fixed-term exclusions in England. It came as no surprise to me that this revealed a steady upward trend. Rates of permanent exclusion across all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools rose from 0.07% in 2014–2015 to 0.08% in 2015–2016, whilst

fixed-term exclusions rose from 3.88% to 4.29% in the same period.[2] The 2018 release reveals a rise to 0.10 and 4.76% respectively.[3] The jump in fixed-term exclusions is particularly concerning as this can be a signal that a school perceives its other options for managing behaviour have run out. Indeed, as the 2018 report says:

> Persistent disruptive behaviour remained the most common reason for permanent exclusions in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools – accounting for 2,755 (35.7 per cent) of all permanent exclusions in 2016/17.[4]

Commenting on trends in the data, the report notes:

> The groups that we usually expect to have higher rates are the ones that have increased exclusions since last year e.g. boys, pupils with special educational needs, pupils known to be eligible for and claiming free school meals and national curriculum years 9 and 10.[5]

There is something rather telling in the language of expectation here. The characteristics associated with higher rates of exclusion, quoted verbatim from the report, are as follows:

- Over half of all permanent (57.2 per cent) and fixed period (52.6 per cent) exclusions occur in national curriculum year 9 or above.
- A quarter (25.0 per cent) of all permanent exclusions were for pupils aged 14, and pupils of this age group also had the highest rate of fixed period exclusion, and the highest rate of pupils receiving one or more fixed period exclusion.
- The permanent exclusion rate for boys (0.15 per cent) was over three times higher than that for girls (0.04 per cent) and the fixed period exclusion rate was almost three times higher (6.91 compared with 2.53 per cent).

- Pupils known to be eligible for and claiming free school meals (FSM) had a permanent exclusion rate of 0.28 per cent and fixed period exclusion rate of 12.54 per cent – around four times higher than those who are not eligible (0.07 and 3.50 per cent respectively).
- Pupils known to be eligible for and claiming free school meals (FSM) accounted for 40.0 per cent of all permanent exclusions and 36.7 per cent of all fixed period exclusions.
- Pupils with identified special educational needs (SEN) accounted for around half of all permanent exclusions (46.7 per cent) and fixed period exclusions (44.9 per cent).
- Pupils with SEN support had the highest permanent exclusion rate at 0.35 per cent. This was six times higher than the rate for pupils with no SEN (0.06 per cent).
- Pupils with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan or with a statement of SEN had the highest fixed period exclusion rate at 15.93 per cent – over five times higher than pupils with no SEN (3.06 per cent).
- Pupils of Gypsy/Roma and Traveller of Irish Heritage ethnic groups had the highest rates of both permanent and fixed period exclusions, but as the population is relatively small these figures should be treated with some caution.
- Black Caribbean pupils had a permanent exclusion rate nearly three times higher (0.28 per cent) than the school population as a whole (0.10 per cent). Pupils of Asian ethnic groups had the lowest rates of permanent and fixed period exclusion.[6]

What does experience tell us?

Various conclusions could be drawn about why these groups are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, but I want to confine myself to a few pertinent observations from my own experience.

Primary-aged pupils

Recently, I have been seeing more and more exclusions of primary-aged pupils, and I fear that the balance will tip away from the concentration we currently see at Year 9 and above. Of course, all exclusions are hugely concerning, but exclusion at such a young age means that children are outside of mainstream education before their school lives have even really begun. I am especially concerned about the number of young children who are being permanently excluded, including multiple children from the same school. This is not to say that these schools are in the wrong – they are often desperate for help in dealing with disruptive, often violent, behaviour and are extremely concerned about the child's safety and the safety of other children and adults, as well as the disruption to learning and climate of anxiety that this can cause.

Boys

The statistics show that boys are more likely to be excluded than girls and, indeed, this was borne out at my PRU. We did, however, have girls who were excluded for extreme emotional reactions or physical assaults on other children and staff. They often needed intense one-to-one support and a referral either to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) or the child psychology service, at which point it was finally recognised that many had ASC, sometimes including pathological demand avoidance (PDA). ASC is often more easily recognised in boys, as girls can be more adept at seeming to cope in social situations. Both boys and girls frequently displayed high anxiety, which manifested itself in their poor behaviour and was linked to home circumstances, social and

communication difficulties, sensory issues and underlying medical needs, such as ASC and ADHD.

Children claiming free school meals

I have seen how socio-economic factors put children claiming free school meals (FSM) at more risk of exclusion, including difficulties in families accessing the right support at an early stage and/or an unwillingness to engage with children's social care, even when intervention is warranted. There is a dearth of expertise in some counties with regard to CAMHS and children's social care involvement, and this needs addressing if we are to seek a more cohesive approach from all agencies.

Perhaps the targeted use of pupil premium money needs to be rethought, if some groups are still very vulnerable and at a greater risk of exclusion than others. We also need to look at how funds are allocated to local education authorities (LEAs) with large numbers of exclusions and whether enough money is going to the schools who need it the most. Most of the heads I meet despair at how exclusion is linked to finite resources; often a modest sum would bring in much-needed help at an early stage, but the funds just aren't there.

Children with additional needs

When I taught in the PRU I was often outraged and indignant that so many children were coming to us with needs that hadn't been diagnosed in their mainstream setting. Now that I work with a range of primaries and secondaries, I can see just how desperately schools are struggling to get the right help: constrained by a lack of time, money and access to specialist knowledge and expertise. I will be exploring proactive strategies to help later in the book but, sadly, there is no magic

wand. The help I offer in my professional practice often centres on getting children the right medical diagnosis and treatment, arranging an EHCP and finding the best provision to meet their needs. I've worked with a significant number of at-risk-of-exclusion children who appeared to have no discernible needs, which is to say that they didn't fit neatly into a statistical or diagnostic category. However, it soon became clear to me that these children had significant *undiagnosed* needs in terms of social communication, language or mental health difficulties. Again, I can only base this on my experience, but time and again, I've seen children being dismissed as 'naughty', and I have been instrumental in unpicking the underlying reasons for this behaviour. Understanding and meeting needs is a critical component of preventing exclusions, which will be returned to frequently in the following chapters.

I am extremely concerned by the statistically high exclusion rates for children with EHCPs. As I said in the introduction, there may be a problem, but the child isn't it. Once a child has a plan in place, they should be getting the support they need. A school should be calling an emergency review meeting to look again at the child's needs. If they are really struggling in mainstream, a special school may be deemed more appropriate, but exclusion is not the answer. We need to embed better systems for addressing and meeting needs, and employ appropriate strategies to pre-empt further difficulties – I will be offering suggestions later on in this book.

I am also very worried by the high exclusion rates for children receiving SEN support, and in my experience there are many more children who need this support but aren't getting access to it. Frequently there were children who arrived at the PRU who we deemed to be in need of SEN support, but rarely was there any evidence collated to explore these unmet needs. Unfortunately, behaviours are very visible, but needs are not; once behaviours reach crisis point, it is often

Too many of our vulnerable young people are being excluded – even those with special educational needs (SEN) and the very young who are only just on the cusp of school life.

In *On the Fringes*, Jackie Ward examines this critical issue through the lens of her experiences in both mainstream and specialist settings and presents practical, solution-focused guidance to help schools deliver the inclusive education that every child deserves.

In doing so she offers informed inspiration to teachers and SEN practitioners working with some of our most vulnerable children – who, without our care, compassion and tailored provision, are too often destined for lives on the fringes of society.

Suitable for teachers, school leaders, SEN professionals, policy-makers and parents.

On the Fringes rightly suggests that there is another way – based around more creative and proactive child-friendly strategies that allow every child to feel that they can succeed.

Will Ryan, education consultant and former assistant head of school effectiveness and Excellence in Cities coordinator, Rotherham Borough Council

Packed with useful tips and advice, this solution-focused resource delves into why some groups are more vulnerable to exclusion than others, with a specific focus on those children and young people who have significant undiagnosed needs and complex mental health difficulties.

Cherryl Drabble, author and Assistant Head Teacher, Highfurlong School

This book is for any teacher, parent or educationalist. It's a personal perspective as well as a professional reflection on what we need to do in order to ensure that every child in every school has their individual needs met to the best of our ability.

Nina Jackson, author, award-winning speaker, mental health ambassador and education consultant, Teach Learn Create Ltd

Jackie Ward was a primary school teacher for over 25 years – and a deputy head and special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) at a primary pupil referral unit (PRU) for eight years – prior to taking early retirement and setting up her own business in 2016. She is now an independent behaviour and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) consultant working in mainstream primary and secondary schools.

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