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Editorial

Elizabeth J Done and Helen Knowler

Behaviour features in official guidance as the uncontested ground for exclusion and ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’ is the most common stated reason for exclusion (formal or otherwise), suggesting that the concept of inclusive education is mobilised in varied ways and circumvented through a similarly diverse range of exclusionary strategies at school level. The UK Government response to the Timpson Review of school exclusion (Department for Education 2019a, 2019b) proposed training school staffs in the links between SEN/D and behaviour in order to reduce formal exclusion rates through schools developing suitable strategies to address behavioural issues.

This special issue seeks to highlight the challenges of researching illegal or strategic school exclusions in England, including exclusionary practices such as ‘off rolling’, ‘coerced home education’ and ‘informal’ managed moves. The aim is to build on recent articles in this journal which acknowledge that exclusionary practices are ‘extremely difficult to research because of their hidden, and potentially illegal, nature’ (Power and Taylor 2021). Illegal exclusionary practices are theorised as events that manifest in nonlinear and unique ways, challenging ‘pipeline’ models that fail to recognise the damaging and immediate impacts of such practices, and that are often only associated with legal permanent exclusion from school. The chosen contributors provide an interdisciplinary analytical approach and varied perspectives on such issues and explore the potential implications for researchers working in this complex and sensitive area of education practice.

Although it has been known for some time that unlawful exclusionary practices are happening in English schools (Children’s Commissioner 2011, 2013), the Office for Standards

in Education in England raised awareness in 2018 when explaining ‘off-rolling’ as a form of ‘gaming’ that involves ‘the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil’ (Ofsted 2019, 50). The paucity of published research around these practices led to media reliance on anecdotal evidence found in commissioned reports (Daniels et al. 2003; Department for Education and Skills 2006; Gill, Quilter-Pinner and Swift 2017) or the annual reports of bodies such as Ofsted. What Ofsted then suggested in later messaging was that ‘off rolling’ was a specific short-term matter that could be eradicated by ensuring that inspectors ‘looked out’ for it during school inspections. ‘Off rolling’ subsequently featured in the new framework for inspection in 2019 (Ofsted 2021) and schools were threatened with being downgraded if evidence of ‘off rolling’ was found. For researchers in the field of school exclusion and unlawful exclusions, this focus on ‘off rolling’ demonstrated that little had changed in the years following publication of the Children’s Commissioner’s reports other than the development of new and more insidious forms of exclusion.

Statistical modelling enabled Ofsted to identify exceptional movements by school and pupil category, and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) are disproportionately removed from school rolls (Ofsted 2018). Disadvantaged pupils are similarly over-represented as a sub-category (Ofsted 2019, 50). Evidence provided by local authorities to the Office of the School Adjudicator (OSA 2018, 35) reported increases in ‘elective’ home education of up to 70% between 2016 and 2017 and, anecdotally, many cases were deemed ‘inappropriate’ responses to pressure from schools. Ofsted was particularly concerned that 5,800 pupils with special needs and/or disabilities left school between Years 10 and 11 (January 2017 to January 2018), stating that a significant proportion ‘may have been off rolled’ (2019, 53). Of the 19,000 pupils (4% of all Year 10 pupils) who left school during this period, 9,700

remained unaccounted for (2019, 50). The concentration of such school leavers at this point in their education prompted the suggestion of ‘gaming’ (Ofsted 2019, 50), whilst in early years settings, refusals of admission were attributed to the ‘gold plating of regulations’ relating to health and safety (p.27). Formal exclusion or ‘off rolling’ of pupils with SEN/D across the age range was linked to schools’ failure to manage disruptive behaviour (p.50). The OSA (2018, 36) noted possible ‘coerced’ home education during the [GCSE] ‘key stage 4 years’ and Ofsted (2019, 27) identified the ‘pressures of performance tables’ as a key factor in ‘off rolling’ by secondary schools.

A discourse of ‘gaming’ has recently gained traction in the media following coverage of the suspension, pending investigation, in October 2017 of a head teacher charged with manipulating A level results by engineering the removal of pupils whose predicted lower attainment would negatively affect the school’s performance table position (Mansell 2017). ‘Off rolling’ was subsequently presented as a practice that is widely deployed and designed to enhance performance data whilst avoiding a legal process of permanent school exclusion which would become a matter of public record thereby risking reputational damage (Bennett 2018). Ofsted does recognise that multiple pressures beyond performance management and its own inspections may encourage ‘off rolling’ but, nevertheless, emphasises that shifting its focus ‘away from performance measures in isolation’ will reduce the incentive for schools to ‘off roll’ (2019, 27). Such an expectation is questionable given the persistence of performance monitoring practices nationally and internationally.

The illegal nature of ‘off rolling’ in England renders research around this topic highly sensitive and, therefore, problematic. Ofsted is confined to statistical analysis as schools are, given Ofsted’s remit, likely to deny that the practice occurs (Ofsted, personal communication, 13 Feb. 2019); hence, advice that its inspectors ask pertinent questions during school inspections (2019, 51). Ofsted also recommended research on senior leaders’ perspectives on

‘off rolling’ and, specifically, into the pressures that culminate in the practice and the likelihood that schools’ alleged ‘empowerment’ through a diminished Ofsted focus on academic performance would permit schools to ‘put the child first’ (2019, 27).

An expansion of the field of small-scale empirical studies, outlined by Elizabeth J. Done in this issue, has included the use of extant official data to highlight the issues of disproportionality and ‘hidden’ or ‘strategic’ exclusions but also raised methodological issues surrounding research in highly politicised and sensitive topic areas (Done and Knowler 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Done et al. 2021). It is hoped that this collection of papers will foster interest in the development of significantly more conceptual clarity around the meaning of inclusive education through consideration of the mechanisms of exclusion that fall outside the formal process of exclusion. Alternative conceptualisations of inclusive education are needed in which emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues, no longer constitute grounds for exclusion or exclusionary practices. The papers here highlight schools’ decision-making in this area and should prompt further debate around the extent to which safeguarding and behaviour policies work against one another in English schools.

Pat Thomson and Martin Mills discuss their experiences of a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) on school exclusion, a task intended to inform a comprehensive policy review. Thomson and Mills describe beginning a review of the relevant literature with a generous definition of exclusion and their focus progressively narrowing to encompass only the literature that reflected the existing policy definition of exclusion. The need to focus on exclusion (policy) eliminated insights about exclusion (research), particularly how wider social relations and school administration, curriculum and pedagogy were implicated. It is argued that the RER was by, and through, definition a practice which limited at the very outset what evidence was included and this, in turn, limited possibilities for policy change.

Alison Black explores varied statistics concerning permanent and fixed term school exclusions in England. Publicly available national data (e.g., DfE, 2019) are used to identify patterns and provide an overview of the number, profile and characteristics (considering variables such as age and ethnicity) of the population of children/young people permanently excluded. Black does not seek to explain the trends but, rather, presents a ‘where we are’ picture of permanent exclusions in England. Such an overview permits contextualisation of the English education system and consideration of the implications of policy for practice with reference to exclusions demonstrated through pupil numbers and proportionality. Black’s analysis highlights issues of disproportionality in the characteristics of students excluded and reveals the ‘under counting’ of students who are excluded. The discussion critiques current methods of data gathering and relates this to socio-political theory on the purposes of exclusion and power relationships. Suggestions are made around how to accurately account for all children/young people who are ‘strategically excluded’ or ‘off-rolled’.

Megan Whitehouse outlines the historical and policy developments related to ‘off rolling’ over the last four years, charting an oscillation between the visibility and invisibility of these practices on the part of the national school inspectorate and policy makers in England. Whitehouse highlights missed opportunities for policy progress following publication of the Timpson Review (DfE 2019a), and the methodological challenges of survey-based methods to investigate experiences of ‘off rolling’ and its prevalence within the English education system.

Zahra Bei and Helen Knowler argue that, while little is currently known about the processes and mechanisms of ‘off rolling’ in schools in England, its prevalence and impacts for Black children, young people and their families are even harder to discern. The relationship between racial disparities in exclusionary practices in schools, persistent disruptive behaviour, and ‘informal’ exclusion is unpacked, and the potential of counter storytelling is critically examined as one way to expose racial injustices in education. Three

composite stories are provided about children removed or 'off rolled' from education, where the reasons for removal relate to their minoritised status and teachers may have been complicit in failing to recognise safeguarding concerns. Bei and Knowler raise critical questions about the intersections between race and Special Educational Needs and note that, while for some children and young people a 'fresh start' or move to Alternative Provision can be a positive experience, in these examples exclusion and transition into AP place these children at considerable risk. Findings from two Serious Case Reviews into the deaths of two murdered children that state that exclusion was a 'catalyst for a deterioration in behaviour' are considered and it is argued, in deciding to exclude, the schools failed to keep these children safe. The implications for identifying 'off rolling' to improve safeguarding in schools are explored.

Elizabeth J. Done explores the ways in which 'persistent disruptive behaviour' features in the accounts of 'off rolling' processes in schools in England volunteered by varied participants, including senior school leaders, SEN Coordinators, educational psychologists and parents, in an ongoing multi-stranded research project. The status of such accounts as data is considered given the high stakes accountability environment in which school principals strive to fulfil their legal remit in the field of inclusion. The trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research is more usually the focus of attention; however, these studies imply that some professionals carefully manage the image of their school and visibility of exclusionary practices to the detriment of students with mental health and behavioural issues. The methodological implications of conducting research in politicised and highly sensitive areas are discussed.

Alice Potter, Helen Knowler and Elizabeth J. Done report on research investigating social media posts around off rolling as relevant to teacher education and as an approach of particular

utility in pandemic conditions where data collection through more conventional methods may be problematic. The affordances and limitations of social media research are outlined.

Off rolling and the related continuum of exclusionary practices is an under-researched and under-theorised area of educational policy and practice in the home nations of the UK that presents numerous theoretical and methodological challenges. As a highly sensitive research topic (Power and Taylor 2021), it touches on issues of legality, coercion, manipulation of parental expectations and under reporting of incidents of exclusion. A climate of professional risk can render reliable research in this area problematic and this special issue highlights the circular deterrent to undertaking such research (the requirement for ‘hard’ as opposed to anecdotal evidence and difficulty of securing such evidence given the perceived risks), the ethical challenges of talking about potentially illegal practice and the ways in which the voices of parents, families and children are often obscured by quasi-legal processes that are hard to challenge following traumatic and difficult relationships with schools that lead to exclusion.

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