School exclusions: the teachers' perspective
Working paper

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The Pinball Kids project

This research forms part of the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce)'s Pinball Kids project, which is examining the underlying causes of exclusions and exploring what conditions need to be in place to enable every child to thrive in education and to reduce unnecessary exclusions.

This work is generously funded by the Betty Messenger Charitable Foundation with support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. To find out more visit: www.thersa.org/PinballKids

About this report

In June 2019, the RSA asked over 1,500 classroom teachers and senior leaders from over 1,300 state schools in England about their views on the use of exclusions as part of the NFER Teacher Voice Survey. The survey asked questions about permanent exclusions (expulsions), fixed-term exclusions (suspensions) and classroom removals (internal exclusions).

The purpose of this survey is to help us develop ideas for ways in which schools might reduce exclusions as part of the Pinball Kids project. However, we think the results might be of interest to other researchers and practitioners working to improve outcomes for pupils at risk of exclusion, so we have published our findings as a working paper.

Methodology

This report is based on data from the June 2019 NFER Teacher Voice survey. A panel of 1,570 practising teachers from 1,357 state schools in England completed the survey online between 21 and 26 June 2019.

811(52 percent) of the respondents were teaching in primary schools and 760 (48 percent) were teaching in secondary schools. There were good levels of representation across key school-level factors including school type, performance and local authority type.

When we refer to "all teachers" in this report, we are referring to all of the respondents to the survey. These include two subgroups: classroom teachers and senior leaders (head teachers, deputy heads and assistant heads), which we also refer to. 1,118 classroom teachers and 445 senior leaders responded to the survey.

Both the primary and secondary school samples were nationally representative in terms of the proportion of the schools which were in each 'quintile' of free school meal eligibility rates. However, the combined sample was not representative in this way. To address this, weights were calculated using national free school meals eligibility data and then applied to the combined sample to create a more representative sample of all schools.

Where we have reported agreement with a statement, these are usually a combination of those who choose 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Some figures may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Key findings

- Despite historically high levels of official exclusions, the vast majority of teachers do not feel that schools are "too quick" to exclude pupils.

    o Only 8 percent of all teachers agreed with the statement "overall, schools are too quick to use official exclusions when there is another suitable approach".

- Teachers are largely supportive of the use of exclusions and classroom removals.

    o 86 percent of all teachers agreed that "being able to officially exclude pupils is essential to provide a good education for all pupils".

    o Over 90 percent of all teachers felt that it was justifiable to remove a child from their classroom to reduce risk to other pupils' safety and limit major disruption to learning.

    o Over three quarters felt that it was justifiable to remove a pupil to avoid *any* disruption to other pupils' learning.

- Teachers believe that even internal exclusion can have a detrimental effect over time.

    o 79 percent of all teachers agreed that repeatedly being removed from lessons "often has a detrimental impact on a pupil's learning" (although 50 percent felt that removal from an individual lesson could be beneficial).

- Teachers want more support for at-risk pupils but would rather that came from other professionals.

    o 70 percent of head teachers believed that being able to access more frequent support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or early help services would help them reduce the number of times that they removed a pupil from the classroom.

    o Over half of classroom teachers believed that support from a highly trained teaching assistant would help them reduce the number of times they sent a child out of class.

    o The three least popular options were training on managing behaviour, supporting children who have experienced trauma, and supporting children with special educational needs, with only around one in 10 teachers choosing these options.
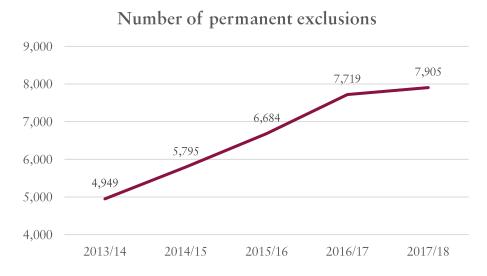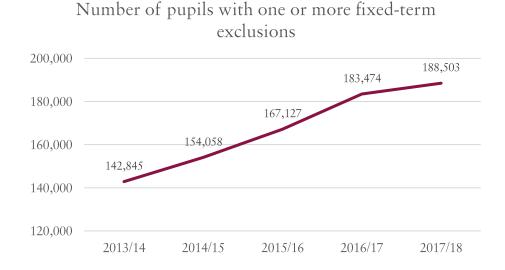
The context – rising school exclusions

Nearly 8,000 pupils were permanently excluded (or expelled) from English schools in 2017/18[1]. On average, that means that 42 are pupils expelled every single school day.

There has been a steep increase over the last five years, with the **total number of permanent exclusions increasing by 60 percent since the academic year 2013/14**, when the total stood at under 5,000.[2]

Number of permanent exclusions

Fixed-term exclusions are also on the rise. Over 410,000 fixed-term exclusions (where a pupil is suspended from school for a fixed period) were recorded in 2017/18. This represents an 8 percent rise from the previous academic year and a 52 percent increase since 2013/14.[3]

Number of pupils with one or more fixed-term exclusions

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[1] RSA analysis of Department for Education data: GOV.UK (2019) *Statistics: exclusions*. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-exclusions [Accessed: 10 September 2019].
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

For both permanent and fixed-term exclusions, the most recent data shows a smaller increase than in previous years, but numbers are still increasing.
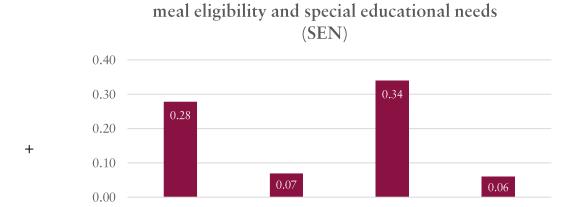
Groups affected by exclusions

Exclusions disproportionately affect some groups of pupils, including the poorest pupils and those with special educational needs and disabilities.[4]

Pupils who receive support from their school for their special educational needs are five times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers with no recorded needs.[5]

Children eligible for Free School Meals were four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their non-eligible peers.[6]

Rate of permanent exclusions by free school meal eligibility and special educational needs (SEN)

Pupils from some ethnic groups also continue to appear disproportionately in exclusions statistics. The rate of permanent and fixed-term exclusions is highest for pupils from Gypsy Roma and Irish traveller backgrounds. Meanwhile, Black Caribbean boys are nearly 40 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than Chinese boys, demonstrating the huge impact that demographic factors can have on the risk of exclusion.[7]

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[4] Partridge, L. (2019). *School exclusions are a social justice issue, new data shows*. RSA website. Available at: https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2019/08/exclusions
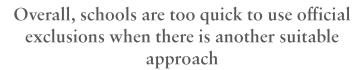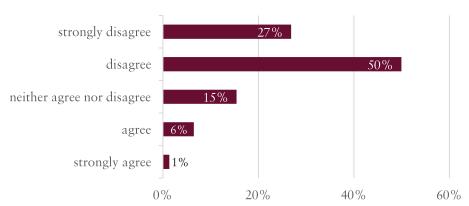[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Are schools too quick to exclude?

Against the backdrop of escalating school exclusions demonstrated by the national statistics, we asked teachers what they thought about rates of exclusion.

The vast majority of those surveyed did not believe that schools are "too quick" to exclude. Only 8 percent of all teachers agreed with the statement "overall, schools are too quick to use official exclusions when there is another suitable approach".

Overall, schools are too quick to use official exclusions when there is another suitable approach

Response	Percentage
strongly disagree	27%
disagree	50%
neither agree nor disagree	15%
agree	6%
strongly agree	1%

One explanation for this result is that relatively few teachers will have experienced a permanent exclusion. 85 percent of mainstream schools did not permanently exclude a pupil in the academic year 2016/17.[8]

Teachers are much more likely to have been witness to suspensions of pupils within their school, although 43 percent of mainstream schools did not use any fixed-term exclusions in 2016/17 according to Department for Education analysis.[9]

It could also be that teachers do not believe there is another suitable approach that protects the interests of the other children in their class. 86 percent of all teachers who responded to the RSA-NFER survey agreed that "being able to officially exclude pupils is essential to provide a good education for all pupils". This notion is supported by research from Policy Exchange, which found that over half of a sample of 743 teachers believed that disruptive behaviour in classrooms affects the quality of education that children receive.[10]

[8] Department for Education. (2019). *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*. [online]. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf [Accessed 10 September 2019].
[9] Ibid.
[10] Williams, J. (2018). *It just grinds you down*. Policy Exchange. [Online]. Available at: https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/It-Just-Grinds-You-Down-Joanna-Williams-Policy-Exchange-December-2018.pdf [Accessed 10 September 2019].

Issues to explore in future research

Through the Pinball Kids project, we have been exploring the notion that trends such as funding shortages, curriculum reform and perverse incentives caused by the accountability regime create a "perfect storm" for rising exclusions.

These polling results raise questions about whether the current context teachers are working in might explain the apparent consensus that high exclusion rates are acceptable. In other words: do teachers feel that exclusions are the best option available to them given the circumstances?

It would be interesting to explore whether teachers now feel exclusions are more necessary, or less avoidable, than they were in the past. If so, what factors do teachers think have changed, and does wider data support those perceptions? We might also question whether "reducing unnecessary exclusions" is the most useful way to frame our goal given the perspectives of teachers demonstrated by these results.

Differences between school leader and classroom teacher views

Our research finds significant differences between the views of classroom teachers and senior leaders. School leaders were almost twice as likely as their classroom teacher colleagues to believe that schools were "too quick" to use exclusions when there could be another suitable approach.

Head teachers are closest to the exclusions process in two key respects: they alone have the legal right to exclude a pupil from their own school; and they may be called on to admit an excluded pupil from another school. It could be that school leaders are more likely than their colleagues to believe schools are "too quick to exclude where there could be another suitable approach" because they experience the ramifications of another local head opting for exclusion. Several current head teachers interviewed for the Pinball Kids project have described local educational ecosystems, in which a school can become what one head described as the "sink school", explaining that "they get given all the pupils that no one else wants".

Issues to explore in future research

This raises interesting questions about how we create conditions in which all local schools, in collaboration with public and charitable services, share the responsibility for supporting children with additional needs (those most likely to be excluded). The RSA is exploring this question with three local authorities in England over the coming months.

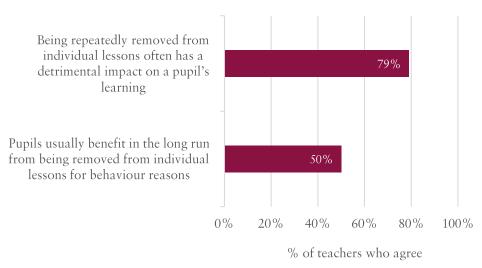## When is it justifiable to remove a child from class?

Acknowledging that many teachers will have limited experience of official exclusions, the RSA chose to ask the profession for their views on a related practice: sending a child out of class for the rest of a lesson. We believe that this is far more prevalent than official exclusions and teachers told us that while a one-off removal might be beneficial for a pupil, they believe that it is harmful if a child is regularly removed from class.

The effect of classroom removals

Half of all teachers who responded to our survey agreed that pupils usually *benefit* in the long run from being removed from individual lessons for behaviour reasons.

At the same time, 79 percent of all teachers surveyed agreed that *repeatedly* being removed from lessons often has a *detrimental* impact on a pupil's learning.

Impact of removing pupils from lessons

% of teachers who agree

There were some differences in opinion between different groups of teachers:

- Primary school teachers were significantly less likely than their secondary colleagues to believe that pupils benefit in the long run from being removed from individual lessons.

- Senior leaders in secondary schools were significantly more likely than their other secondary school colleagues to believe that being repeatedly removed from lessons often has a detrimental impact on a pupil's learning.

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Reasons to remove a child from class

Despite acknowledging the potentially damaging effects of repeatedly removing a pupil from class, 77 percent of teachers surveyed would remove a child from class to "to avoid any disruption to other pupils' learning".

Unsurprisingly, most heads and teachers think it's justifiable to remove a pupil from class to avoid major disruption and to protect other children and staff.
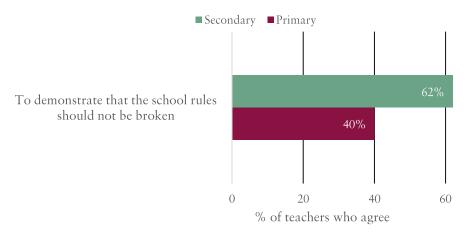
Over 90 percent of all teachers felt that it was justifiable to remove a child from their classroom to reduce risk to other pupils' safety, to limit major disruption to other pupils' learning or to reduce risk to the teacher's own safety. 100 percent of head teachers surveyed stated that it was justifiable to remove a pupil from a classroom for the rest of the lesson to limit major disruption to other pupils' learning.

The vast majority of teachers also thought that it was reasonable to remove a child in order to ensure they got access to further support. Over three quarters of teachers stated that it was justifiable to provide them with access to social, learning and behavioural support or to avoid any disruption to other pupils' learning. This has interesting implications given the widely acknowledged importance of teacher contact time.

Demonstrating that school rules should not be broken

Interestingly, 6 in 10 secondary school respondents stated that it is justifiable to remove a pupil for the rest of the lesson to demonstrate that the school rules should not be broken, compared with only 4 in 10 of their primary school counterparts.

Do you think that it is justifiable to remove a pupil from your classroom for the rest of the lesson to demonstrate that the school rules should not be broken?

■ Secondary ■ Primary

To demonstrate that the school rules should not be broken

62%

40%

0   20   40   60

% of teachers who agree

This difference in opinion between primary and secondary school respondents may relate to stricter behaviour management approaches being applied in secondary schools as indicated in Department for Education-commissioned research. A 2017 report from ASK Research found that

larger secondary schools 'were more likely to use punitive approaches as a frontline response e.g. loss of privileges, isolation/internal exclusion, fixed-term exclusions, managed moves and fixed-term exclusions' than primary schools.[11]

Issues to explore in future research

More than 75 percent of teachers stated that it is justifiable to remove a pupil if there is any disruption to other pupils' learning. This would appear, on first reading, to be quite a low bar for classroom removal, and might suggest that low level behaviour problems are leading pupils to miss out on learning. Is there a hidden problem here that we need to investigate further?

Or is it the case that teachers are generally very skilled at managing low level behaviour problems, and so can generally handle them in the classroom without any disruption?

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[11] Skipp, A. and Hopwood, V. (2017). *Case studies of behaviour management practices in schools rated Outstanding.* ASK Research and Department for Education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602506/Behaviour_Management_Case_Studies_Report.pdf [Accessed 10 September 2019].

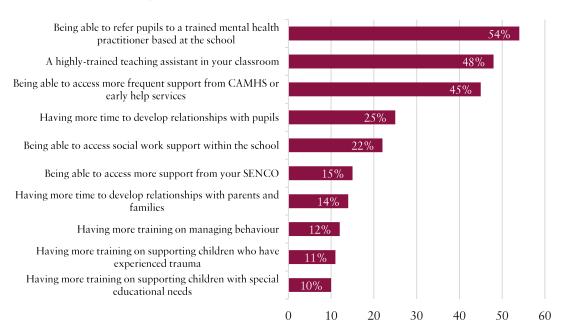**What support would help teachers reduce the number of times they remove a pupil from their classroom?**

We wanted to know what interventions teachers believe would enable them to reduce the number of times they send children out of class. We gave respondents a range of options from training to support from external services. Each respondent could select the three options that they would find most helpful.

Overall, mental health support was the most popular option, but there were significant differences between the opinions of senior leaders and classroom teachers, and between the responses of secondary and primary teachers.

Mental health support
More than half of all respondents believed that being able to refer pupils to an in-school mental health practitioner would help them reduce the number of times they remove a child from their classroom.

Which of the following would most help you to reduce the number of times you remove a pupil from your classroom for the rest of the lesson?

Option	Percentage
Being able to refer pupils to a trained mental health practitioner based at the school	54%
A highly-trained teaching assistant in your classroom	48%
Being able to access more frequent support from CAMHS or early help services	45%
Having more time to develop relationships with pupils	25%
Being able to access social work support within the school	22%
Being able to access more support from your SENCO	15%
Having more time to develop relationships with parents and families	14%
Having more training on managing behaviour	12%
Having more training on supporting children who have experienced trauma	11%
Having more training on supporting children with special educational needs	10%

There is some promising news for the many teachers who believe this intervention would be helpful. In a joint green paper, Department for Education and Department of Health have committed to creating a new mental health workforce of community-based mental health support teams.[12]

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[12] Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education. (2018). *Government Response to the Consultation on Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: a Green Paper and Next Steps* https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/transforming-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-provision-a-green-paper [Accessed 10 September 2019].

In an interview for the RSA's Pinball Kids project, Professor Peter Fonagy OBE explained to us that the idea was to avoid taking a child out of school to attend a mental health appointment that they might not engage with. Instead, mental health practitioners based in schools will be able to observe the development of children's mental health over time and offer early interventions that may prevent the need for escalation to external support.

The first cohort of Educational Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs) will begin training to deliver evidence-based interventions in schools for pupils with mild to moderate mental health problems in autumn 2019.[13] This new cadre of professionals will come from backgrounds in psychology and mental health. To achieve their higher education diploma, candidates will undertake university-based study and gain practical experience in a school in one of 25 trailblazer sites.[14] However, the programme will not reach all schools in the near future, with some reports that it will only reach up to a quarter of schools by 2023.[15]

Teacher training

It is interesting that the least popular options were those that involve teachers being trained to support pupils themselves. This may indicate that teachers feel they do not have enough time for training, do not feel the training would be of a sufficiently high quality or that they do not believe that they should be responsible for providing these types of support to pupils.

Senior leaders were even less likely than classroom teachers to believe training would be helpful. 8 percent of senior leaders thought training on managing behaviour would be helpful, compared with 13 percent of classroom teachers. Similarly, 7 percent of leaders thought training on supporting children with special educational needs would be helpful, compared with 11 percent of classroom teachers.

The exception to this trend was opinion on trauma-informed practice. 14 percent of senior leaders thought this would be helpful, compared with 10 percent of classroom teachers.

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[13] Anna Freud Centre. (2019). *Educational Mental Health Practitioner (EMHP) Programme London Recruitment 2019: Information for Applicants*. Available at: https://www.annafreud.org/media/9637/emhp-recruitment-pack-info.pdf [Accessed 10 September 2019].
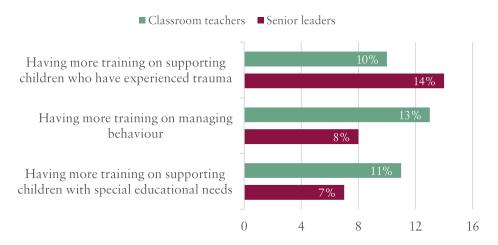
[14] NHS England. *Transforming young people's mental health support teams and pilots*. Available at: https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/trailblazers/mh-support-teams/ [Accessed 10 September 2019].

[15] Whittaker, F. (2018). *First school mental health teams will be set to work by the end of 2019*. Schools Week. 25th July 2018. Available at: https://schoolsweek.co.uk/first-school-mental-health-support-teams-will-be-set-to-work-by-the-end-of-2019/ [Accessed 10 September 2019].
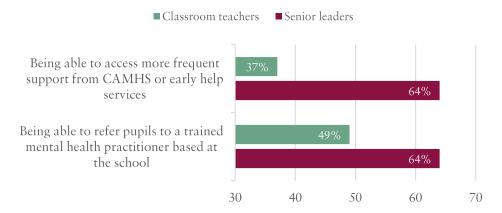
Which of the following would most help you to reduce the number of times you remove a pupil from your classroom for the rest of the lesson?

■ Classroom teachers ■ Senior leaders

Having more training on supporting children who have experienced trauma
- Classroom teachers: 10%
- Senior leaders: 14%

Having more training on managing behaviour
- Classroom teachers: 13%
- Senior leaders: 8%

Having more training on supporting children with special educational needs
- Classroom teachers: 11%
- Senior leaders: 7%

(x-axis: 0, 4, 8, 12, 16)

Senior leaders were significantly more likely than their colleagues to opt for mental health support to reduce classroom removals.

Which of the following would most help you to reduce the number of times you remove a pupil from your classroom for the rest of the lesson?

■ Classroom teachers ■ Senior leaders

Being able to access more frequent support from CAMHS or early help services
- Classroom teachers: 37%
- Senior leaders: 64%

Being able to refer pupils to a trained mental health practitioner based at the school
- Classroom teachers: 49%
- Senior leaders: 64%

(x-axis: 30, 40, 50, 60, 70)

If you look at head teachers alone (removing deputy and assistant heads), 70 percent selected being able to access more frequent support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or early help services.

This may be because head teachers, and other senior leaders, are likely to hold the relationship with services like CAMHS and therefore be more acutely aware of the impact of a child's needs not meeting the threshold for external support. Alternatively, it could be that head teachers, faced with the challenge of managing school budgets in a context of real-terms cuts, feel that this service needs to be delivered by an external agency.

Teaching assistants

Budgetary pressures could also explain why only one third of senior leaders selected the option of a highly-trained teaching assistant to help reduce the number of classroom removals, whereas this was the most popular choice among classroom teachers, with over half selecting it. From 2011 to 2018, there was a 13 percent decrease in the number of teaching assistants employed by secondary schools in England.[16] According to a National Association for Head Teachers survey last year, over 80 percent of head teachers had reduced the hours or numbers of teaching assistants to make their budget balance.[17]

Building relationships

Teachers in secondary schools were significantly more likely to opt for more time to develop relationships with pupils (33 percent) and families (18 percent) than their primary school colleagues (19 percent and 10 percent respectively). It is understandable that they may feel this way given that they have less contact time with each pupil and that parental involvement is typically higher in primary schools than secondary.[18] Research shows a strong association between parental engagement and a child's academic outcomes, and there is evidence of the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on academic and social outcomes.[19]

Issues to explore in future research

We would be interested to further explore whether teachers' choices are influenced by budgetary concerns. If so, how might an injection of cash from the Department for Education best be spent in order to help them support children to stay in mainstream education?

We are also interested in the question of how schools (particularly secondary schools) might be able to enable teachers to focus on developing deeper relationships with pupils and families. As part of the final report from the Pinball Kids project, we will be publishing case studies of schools that have prioritised allowing time for teachers to develop relationships with parents (e.g. the Family School in Islington) and pupils (e.g. Carr Manor Community School in Leeds).

[16] Department for Education. (2019). *School workforce in England: November 2018.* [online]. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-school-workforce [Accessed 10 September 2019].

[17] https://www.naht.org.uk/news-and-opinion/press-room/new-poll-reveals-full-impact-of-school-funding-crisis/

[18] Williams, B., Williams, J. and Ullman, A. (2002). *Parental Involvement in Education.* [online] Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4669/1/RR332.pdf [Accessed 10 September 2019].

[19] Education Endowment Foundation. (2018). *Parental Engagement – Teaching and Learning Toolkit.* [online]. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/generate/?u=https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/toolkit/?id=139&t=Teaching percent20and percent20Learning percent20Toolkit&e=139&s= [Accessed 10 September 2019].

Conclusion

Given that it is relatively rare for teachers to be exposed to official exclusions, especially permanent exclusions, it is understandable that they do not believe that schools are "too quick to use permanent exclusions when there is another suitable approach".

A far greater number of teachers will have had cause to remove a pupil from a classroom during their career. The vast majority of the teachers we surveyed felt it was justifiable to do so to keep other pupils safe and to limit major disruption to their lessons. Half of all teachers who responded to our survey agreed that pupils usually benefit in the long run from being removed from individual lessons for behaviour reasons. However, nearly 80 percent felt that it could be detrimental to a child's academic progress if they were repeatedly removed from class.

94 percent of teachers felt that one or more of the types of support that we suggested would help them reduce the number of times they remove children from their classroom. The most popular option overall, selected by 54 percent of all respondents, was being able to refer pupils to a trained mental health practitioner at their school. Help is on its way for some schools with a pilot of Educational Mental Health Practitioners reaching schools in "trailblazer" sites from next year. The clear demand demonstrated in this survey supports arguments for this programme, if successful in its pilot year, to be rolled out wider as soon as possible.

The survey also demonstrates some support for a 'What Works for Children's Social Care' pilot that started earlier this year, placing social workers in schools in Lambeth, Southampton and Stockport. 30 percent of senior leaders (and 19 percent of classroom teachers) believed this would help them reduce the number of times they remove a pupil from a classroom.

It is notable that the most popular options to support children at risk of internal and external exclusion were those that involve teachers referring pupils to another professional. In contrast, the three teacher training options suggested only garnered the interest of 10-12 percent of all respondents. Perhaps for understandable reasons given current teacher workload and pressures created by the accountability system to focus on exam results, teachers seemed to prefer responses to challenging pupil behaviour that involved removing the pupil from the classroom to being supported to prevent and respond to that behaviour themselves. These issues include workload and pressures created by the accountability system.

The RSA believes in the importance of a whole school commitment to inclusion underpinned by the practices of teaching and non-teaching staff. In some of our case study schools for the Pinball Kids project (and for previous projects such as Schools Without Walls),[20] we have seen inspirational examples of schools achieving inclusion. This is enabled by a staff and timetable structure that allows for a more relational approach, and an investment in training in subjects such as trauma-informed practice.

These examples indicate that it is important to build the capacity of school staff, as well as enhancing the ability of other services to step in to support schools where external expertise is needed.

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[20] Partridge, L. and Bath, N. (2019). *Schools Without Walls*. RSA. [online]. Available at: https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/schools-without-walls [Accessed 10 September 2019].