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The political economy of school exclusion in Northern Ireland: the intersection of perspectives from mainstream education, alternative provision and an official education body

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the context of school exclusion in Northern Ireland. In doing so, we explore the political economy of exclusion, focusing in particular on the intersection of perspectives between four key stakeholder groups: principals ($n = 7$) and teachers ($n = 31$) in mainstream schools, representatives from an official education body ($n = 8$), and staff from Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) Centres ($n = 4$) who provide alternative education for young people who have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools or who have social, emotional, behavioural and well-being needs that cannot be met in mainstream schools. The study used qualitative data from individual and small group interviews and focus groups with the stakeholders mentioned above. School exclusion has been under-researched in Northern Ireland and this paper addresses this gap. Additionally, official exclusion data point to relatively low levels of temporary and permanent exclusions compared with the other jurisdictions of the UK, though why this is so remains unclear. The analysis draws attention to the use and prevalence of informal or unofficial school exclusions; claims of limited official support for schools; restricted collaboration between mainstream schools and alternative education; and a general consensus around limited resources to support pupils at risk and to train teachers.



KEYWORDS

School exclusion;
suspension/expulsion;
Northern Ireland; informal
exclusion; political economy;
policy

Introduction

This paper focuses on school exclusion in Northern Ireland and is set within the wider context of a UK-wide ESRC study called Excluded Lives (2019–2024) which examines the political economies of school exclusion and their consequences across the UK. The Excluded Lives group involves collaboration between Oxford University, Cardiff University, Edinburgh University and Queen's University Belfast.

A key rationale for this paper is to address a gap in the empirical research on school exclusion in Northern Ireland in comparison with a wider corpus of research carried out in

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other jurisdictions of the UK over the last 20 years. As we will see below, there have been few direct studies of school exclusion in Northern Ireland during this period.

An additional rationale for the paper stems from a cross-jurisdictional comparison of official exclusion which suggests that Northern Ireland and Scotland have low exclusion patterns over time, in comparison with England and Wales (Cole et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2021; McCluskey et al., 2019). The present paper sets out to try to identify some of the reasons that the pattern of exclusions seem to be lower in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the work of Mosco (2008, 2009) on the concept of political economy, this paper will examine the social relations and the intersection between various groups, namely those representing an official education body (we have opted not to name the official bodies to protect the anonymity of participants), school principals and teachers and those that provide alternative educational provision termed Education Other Than at School (EOTAS). In this intersection between groups of participants, we will examine the different ways in which the notion of school exclusion is framed by different stakeholders. We will also show how unofficial, informal or hidden forms of exclusions (Power & Taylor, 2020) can distort official narratives but provide glimpses of the challenges that schools face in managing behaviour and supporting young people at risk of exclusion. Additionally, and in terms of political economy, we examine the tensions and disconnects between official bodies, schools and EOTAS providers in relation to the procedures involved in school exclusion. We suggest that resources and budgetary constraints on schools, and across the wider system, create limitations in the services and supports that can be offered to young people at risk of exclusion and that this places limits on what can be offered in terms of professional development support for teachers, and wider forms of support for schools and EOTAS providers.

Cross-jurisdictional patterns of exclusion

The patterns of official exclusion data which compare temporary and permanent exclusions across the four jurisdictions of the UK have not changed in any significant way since pre-Covid-19 (2018/19) (Duffy et al., 2021). The key element of this comparative analysis is that England (DfE, 2022) continues to officially exclude at a higher rate than other jurisdictions based on temporary and permanent exclusions, followed by Wales (Welsh Government, 2022); by contrast Scotland (Scottish Government, 2022) and Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2022) have a consistent pattern of lower temporary exclusion rates, while Scotland recorded almost no permanent exclusions in 2020/21. Table 1 offers a comparison of these data demonstrating the percentage of compulsory

Table 1. A comparison of school exclusions across the UK 20/21.

Year 20/21	Temporary Exclusions	Permanent Exclusions	% of Compulsory School-age Population
Northern Ireland	3,506	25	Temporary: 1.2% Permanent: 0.008%
Scotland	8,322	1	Temporary: 1.19% Permanent: **
Wales	13,028	127	Temporary: 2.8% Permanent: 0.03%
England	352,454	3,928	Temporary: 4.25% Permanent: 0.05%

Notes: At the time of writing it is not yet possible to make jurisdictional comparisons for the academic year 2021/22 as Scotland has not yet published these data, nor did the jurisdiction publish exclusion data during the academic year 2019/20 as a consequence of Covid-19.

school age population that have been temporarily (suspension) or permanently excluded (expulsion).

Official patterns of school exclusion in Northern Ireland since 2015

The data presented below (Table 2) offer information about the rates of official school exclusion, in terms of suspensions and expulsions from schools in Northern Ireland over the period 2015 to 2022. The number of suspensions in Northern Ireland has remained relatively low and stable over time. There was a noticeable drop in 2019/20 and, to some extent, in 2020/21, but it is likely that this is attributable to the impact of the Covid-19 lockdowns and schooling from home. The highest number of suspensions since 2015 occurred in 2021/22, which may also be a consequence of the out-working of Covid-19. Daniels et al. (2020, p. 1), writing about the post-Covid-19 context in England, argued that there is likely to be ‘a new heightened risk for school exclusions caused by the recent COVID-19 pandemic’, especially for vulnerable young people and those who have traditionally been over-represented among students subject to exclusion.

The patterns of data in Table 1 and Table 2 indicate a consistently low rate of suspensions and expulsions in Northern Ireland, in comparison with England and Wales. This could be a consequence of policy success in which schools are supported to act in an inclusive manner and minimise exclusion, or it could be a consequence of policy neglect in which official data provide only a partial picture and schools feel they lack capacity and support to act in inclusive ways. The analysis in this paper will suggest that the latter is the more likely situation.

The findings in this paper will present five interconnected themes that demonstrate that school exclusion is complex, problematic and requires attention from policymakers: (i) informal exclusionary practice appears to be prevalent across the system and there is indicative evidence that schools may be trying to reframe or legitimise some of this practice as beneficial or useful; (ii) schools report inadequate levels of official support and overly bureaucratic systems associated with exclusion; (iii) perspectives from the official body and those offering alternative provision suggest that mainstream provision, for some young people, is inflexible, constrained by academic priorities and in some cases does not provide inclusive practice; (iv) there is some evidence suggesting limited collaboration between mainstream schools and EOTAS providers; and lastly (v) a lack of resources and declining budgets are placing pressure on schools and limiting their capacity to support pupils, and may limit the potential of integrated support between schools and communities.

The following section will provide a brief, critical review of the school exclusion literature and then an overview of the methodology. Next, we will present and discuss the findings and then return to address what is in effect a dilemma as to whether there is evidence of policy success or policy neglect in regard to school exclusion.

Table 2. Suspensions and expulsions in Northern Ireland 2015–2022 (based on suspension and expulsion data published by DE 2015–2023).

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Suspensions	4,156	4,048	4,069	4,549	3,342	35,06	4,714
Expulsions	19	33	15	30	11	25	20

Review of literature on school exclusion in Northern Ireland

There have been a limited number of studies in Northern Ireland since the mid-1990s, directly addressing the issues of school exclusion. Barr and Kilpatrick (1998) pointed to a lack of official data in Northern Ireland and sought to provide an overview of the processes and procedures that schools were required to follow in Northern Ireland. Following this, Barr et al. (2000) undertook a comparative study of the legislative frameworks between England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Abbott's (2006) qualitative study focused on principals' perspectives on inclusion with some consideration of exclusion, and Knipe et al. (2007) focused on the perspectives of young people in schools, alternative provision and youth work settings on the current official procedures and processes surrounding school exclusion. McGuckin and Lewis (2008) surveyed all schools in Northern Ireland to examine how bullying was managed and sought to identify whether schools used exclusion as a sanction for bullying behaviour.

A series of studies and reports were undertaken that focused on alternative educational provision in Northern Ireland. Kilpatrick et al. (2007) used a peer research methodology to explore 318 disaffected young people's perspectives on alternative education, though the paper focused more on the methodological approach of peer research than exclusion per se. Bryson (2010) offered a children's rights analysis of alternative education in Northern Ireland using the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a framework for assessment. Gallagher (2011) presented a general overview of exclusions and focused on the workings of a single alternative education centre in Northern Ireland, focusing on aspects such as enrolments, referrals, admissions, the curricular offer at the centre and levels of academic achievement, but did not provide any methodological information to explain how the findings were ascertained. In a paper prepared by the research unit of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Perry (2015) provided a report on the general features of EOTAS provision in Northern Ireland.

There was also a series of studies conducted across the 2000s that focused on the relationship between substance misuse and school exclusion. Duncan and McCrystal (2002) positioned young people excluded from mainstream schools as a vulnerable group, at risk of marginalisation and anti-social behaviour. They pointed to available data in England and Wales that suggested an association between school exclusion and drug use but raised concerns that few if any resources had been made available in Northern Ireland to examine this issue and called for more qualitative research with young people who had been excluded. The Belfast Youth Development Study (BYDS), one of the largest longitudinal cohort studies of its kind in the UK, engaged with a subset of young people who had been excluded from school and were attending alternative educational provision (Higgins et al., 2018; McCrystal et al., 2005, 2007). Compared with those in mainstream schools, this subset of young people were more likely to use illicit substances and engage in anti-social behaviours. More contemporary perspectives from O'Lynn (2016) offered a rights-based analysis of alternative educational provision, with some parallels with Bryson (2010). O'Lynn's position paper examined whether the organisation, management and the delivery of the EOTAS provision was rights compliant, concluding, however, at the time of writing, that it did not extend far enough to ensure and protect the educational rights of those excluded from school (O'Lynn, 2016). Duffy et al. (2021) provided an analysis of the disparities in the temporary and permanent

exclusion rates across all four jurisdictions of the UK, as well as a revised overview of the legislative and procedural frameworks associated with school exclusion in Northern Ireland.

A critical review of this literature reveals that our knowledge base on school exclusion in Northern Ireland is quite limited and there are very few direct studies of school exclusion. Earlier studies focus on legislative and procedural frameworks. There is some, limited representation of the perspectives of school leaders and young people, and in many of the studies the issue of school exclusion is tangential to their primary concerns. Also, the perspectives of teachers, both from mainstream and alternative education, as well as policymakers and those representing wider civic organisations, are missing from the literature, and there is virtually no evidence on the perspectives of young people and families.

Given the critique which exposes gaps in our knowledge base, this paper, as an element of a much wider UK comparative study, offers a direct focus on school exclusion and represents the perspectives of school principals, teachers in mainstream education, teachers and leaders in EOTAS, and those representing official bodies.

Methodology

The Excluded Lives study involved three broad strands of research. The first strand was a cross-jurisdictional comparison of the legal and policy frameworks; an analysis of secondary data sets on school exclusion; the social costs of school exclusion; and a comparative examination of the alternative provision across the jurisdictions. The second strand was largely school-based and focused on the perspectives of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and pastoral care leads; the perspective of principals and teachers; and the perspectives of pupils and parents/guardians. The third strand examined the economic costs of school exclusion; cross jurisdictional comparisons; and multi-disciplinary perspectives on school exclusion.

This study draws from the first and second work strands and examines the intersection between principals and teachers representing mainstream schools, those representing alternative provision in Northern Ireland, and an official education body that we have opted not to name to protect the anonymity of participants.

In 2019, the research team undertook an analysis of official exclusion patterns from 2013 to 2018 based on Department of Education data. Our analysis categorised post-primary schools into those with comparatively high levels of exclusion over time, variable rates of exclusion over time, and those with consistently low rates of exclusion. This identified 19 schools which were subsequently invited to take part in the study.

Seven schools agreed to participate. The schools were all non-selective secondary schools, with different management types reflecting the denominational character of education in Northern Ireland, but including some religiously integrated schools (see [Table 3](#)). Seven semi-structured interviews with principals were conducted, and five focus groups of teachers were undertaken in five of the seven schools. The resulting dataset underwent a thematic analysis akin to the stages developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). A similar process was undertaken by each of the jurisdiction teams in the project from England, Scotland and Wales, and all four jurisdictional teams met to agree an initial coding structure derived from common instruments. Additional codes were added, as

Table 3. Data sources.

Data sources	Number of participants	Contextual information
School principals	7	3 Catholic Maintained schools, 3 Controlled schools and 1 Grant Maintained Integrated school
School teachers	31	Focus groups representing 5 participating schools: School 1 ($n = 4$); School 2 ($n = 8$); School 4 ($n = 4$); School 5 ($n = 8$); School 6 ($n = 7$)
EOTAS centre representatives	4	Representing leadership in 4 different EOTAS centres including: 3 managed by the Education Authority and one run by a charity.
Official education body representatives	8	Representing a range of leadership positions and roles which offer guidance and supports to schools and pupils

appropriate, at each of the jurisdictional levels, and then a final cross-jurisdictional coding structure was agreed upon. A comparative cross-jurisdictional analysis is currently underway and will be published in due course. This paper focuses on findings specific to Northern Ireland.

Each of the jurisdictions also interviewed a range of individuals responsible for providing alternative educational provision, including those representing statutory bodies and those representing third-sector organisations such as charities and other non-profit organisations that had a stake in school exclusion. In Northern Ireland, two members of the research group conducted individual and small group interviews with a total of nine people from two official bodies at the system level, leaders from four EOTAS centres and a representative from a third sector organisation. For the purposes of this paper, we have opted to focus on the perspectives of an official education body (see Table 3). These interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data underwent a thematic analysis using the same approach outlined above.

Given the focus on the political economy of exclusion and the intersection of perspectives between four key stakeholder groups, the research team examined the data from two different work strands and collectively agreed and then scrutinised themes where there was clear evidence of intersection – where the various stakeholders focused on the same issues. These are presented in the findings section below.

Findings

The prevalence and reframing of informal exclusions

Official exclusion figures across the UK provide data on recorded exclusions from schools, but data from the Excluded Lives project indicate that these are an incomplete picture as schools also use unofficial and informal practices of exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2019; Power & Taylor, 2020). These are the types of exclusions that are not officially recorded, most likely because they are contrary to official procedures and guidelines provided to schools in each of the jurisdictions. As a consequence, the complete picture of school exclusion is likely to remain obscured. This paper offers some insight into this practice and will suggest that while the practice is ‘hidden’, it is nuanced, requires contextual framing and, in some cases, is couched as being appropriate and even beneficial.

Examples of informal practice were commonplace across the NI dataset. The examples we were told about included sending young people home for the rest of day, often referred to as ‘cooling off’, or ‘de-escalation’; using reduced timetables for individual

pupils; sending young people out of classroom to a dedicated, but isolated space; or removing them from a classroom to place them under supervision, normally of a senior member of staff, for a set period. We asked principals and teachers if their school used informal or unofficial exclusion. Respondents from all of the schools confirmed that they used informal practices:

To suspend someone is a big job and you have to have all your ducks in a row to do it. I think that's why principals find it [informal exclusion] to be an easier way out. They turn around and say, 'Look, you don't really want your child to have an expulsion do you?' (Principal School 5)

A common theme that emerged from the data was a reluctance to formally exclude pupils. Some principals considered formal exclusions as being significant events that could be detrimental to a pupil's future:

Nobody should want to exclude a child. That's your starting point. And we should be creative enough to do what we can to avoid the exclusion of a child, because that's a huge thing. And if they're excluded from school, or suspension, or whatever it may be, there's a particular path that they can go down. And that path is very difficult to get back out of. (Principal School 2)

Extending this point of analysis, the principals and teachers attempted to reframe or legitimise certain types of informal exclusions: a common narrative was that principals did not want a suspension to appear on a young person's formal record or that a short informal exclusion was useful as a means of de-escalation. The idea of the cooling-off period can be seen in the following extract, but it is noteworthy that this is also framed as a *common sense approach*:

I would've done unofficial ones whereby you maybe had a kid who first slipped up and you genuinely didn't want their name going to EA [Education Authority] or whatever, you didn't want to formalise [it]. Now we know in our mind that it's no big deal; it goes to EA and they file it somewhere and never look at it anyway; however to the parents quite often it means a lot ... they worry about this black mark on their child's name. (Principal School 6)

Through conversations on the telephone, the parent may tell me, 'I'm going to keep him off today'. And I'll say, 'yes, but use that time to talk about behaviour, to talk about how we resolve it' ... So it is not an official suspension. It's not an official exclusion, it's nothing like that, there's a common sense approach between a parent and a school to say, he needs a bit of cooling off time (Principal School 2)

The extract below, from a representative of an official education body, demonstrates a level of support for certain informal exclusion practices. In this case, they frame such practice as a type of 'best interests' intervention that is supported with 'good intent'. It is particularly noteworthy that this respondent makes the case that informal exclusions may be as a consequence of limited options, resources and training for schools. This theme will be explored in more detail later in the paper.

Those schools that are trying to be solution focused and are trying to use the more preventative measures and really reflect that they have an understanding, ... they recognise that actually the child is not in a place emotionally to be sitting in classroom and learning because they're actually maybe processing something else. And in the child's best interest, it would be appropriate for them to be at home. And we are finding schools are using a process more, they call it grace days, or whatever. They're basically unofficial suspension days, but they're not being recorded. And while there's a very good intent behind that, there doesn't

seem to be anything alternative for schools, by way of how do you put support in place ... I think it is back down to resources, training for staff as well. (A3.NI.3)

Inadequate levels of official support and overly bureaucratic systems

Principals and teachers were asked about the types of official support they received for managing exclusions and behavioural support in schools. Most of the principals were critical of the official support available to them. In some cases, principals argued that there was a disconnect between behavioural support provided by the Education Authority (EA) and the schools, with some suggesting that behavioural support services did not understand the context of schools, or EA Officers did not have the skillset or experience to help them adequately manage issues related to behaviour that could result in an exclusion. When asked about the levels of support provided by the Education Authority, Principal 1 indicated:

Nothing, nothing. Oh, it's there the organisation's there like, there is a behaviour support unit. As useful as a chocolate poker. ... I don't feel that the support that EA could offer me is of any value. (Principal School 1)

EA do not have, in my view, the skillset within their staff to come down and guide us. ... I need someone who has been there and done it ... it's quite clear to me that their knowledge and understanding isn't anywhere near the same level of mine. ... Many of them have never run a school; many of them have never been a Vice Principal. So in terms of what help comes our way, none. (Principal School 6)

Furthermore, there did appear to be recognition from a representative of an official educational body that current policies were inadequate in terms of offering support and guidance for schools:

There isn't a huge amount of guidance available to schools, ... perhaps there is a bit of a disconnect in terms of, you know, positive behaviour plans, pastoral support, and exclusions ... there, there hasn't been an awful lot of stuff recently, on exclusions, if you look at the policy, it's more about how do you define exclusions (A3NI.8)

Others argued that the procedures required to access alternative provision for pupils were overly bureaucratic, inflexible and were implemented too slowly. In the extract below, the principal highlights that the support for schools and pupils in need can take time and argues that there is no urgent provision for young people in crisis:

So that behaviour support system, very difficult at times to get access to, the support you require because you have to wait on a panel ... if I have a child in crisis ... I have to wait to the 18th of December for the panel. ... In the meantime, the kid is getting more disengaged from education, and more disaffected and doesn't want to be here ... I cannot get an interim placement, an emergency placement when a child is in crisis? ... I think there should be a degree of flexibility. (Principal School 2)

Teachers also pointed to a lack of support in terms of training and professional development associated with supporting pupils at risk of exclusion. In the following example, a teacher describes undertaking their own professional development by gathering

information and resources online and from friends or colleagues and points to little official training or support:

Well, [name] and I are doing some online training, which, to be honest, is pants. It's not good. The resources that I would use for the pupils, I'm just looking for them and finding them online, and it's just through a friend of a friend or somebody who is a life coach or a counsellor or something, just chatting to them and getting some information from them. I'm just winging it. And, you know, there is – there's behaviour support in EA, but their behaviour support again just consists of a whole lot of pages. 'Here, read that, do that'. We're already doing that. (Teacher 2 School 4)

Mainstream provision is inflexible and not inclusive enough

Conversely, when we interviewed those representing official bodies and EOTAS providers, there were accusations levied at some mainstream schools that they were not inclusive enough or lacked the capacity to offer flexible solutions to meet the needs of certain pupils.

In the extract below, the participant who represents EOTAS provision appears to point to an inability or unwillingness in the mainstream system to make flexible adjustments to school systems for smaller numbers of pupils, saying that, in contrast, these adjustments appeared to be routinely available in EOTAS provision:

I'm not criticising the schools. But you know, when you have a class of 25, and there's 1000 children, you don't have time to spend with these young people. So it's a numbers game. [W]e can be very much more flexible here. If they don't like a subject, we can change it. If they want to go out early, we can let them out. If they don't like a teacher we can take them away from the teacher that day. You can't do that in the mainstream environment (A3NI.12)

Furthermore, representatives from EOTAS centres argued that there are many young people in the mainstream system that require higher levels of support and nurture than others. They argued that alternative provision was better suited to them and it had the capacity to offer this level of support. Others representing official perspectives argued that they had observed disparities and inconsistencies across the mainstream system in terms of approaches to inclusion, pupil support and nurture; in short, some schools appeared to be less inclusive than others:

So I know, there's some schools who make them spend time in a particular, in the headmaster's [office], you know, corridor with a classroom assistant. So there's lots of negative. It is still there. I think that comes down to the ethos . . . But then we have the other side of the coin, the proactive schools, who are setting up nurture hubs, who are setting up loving nurture rooms within their schools, making it warm, making it nurturing and caring, where there's support for young people to go when they are dysregulated (A3NI.2)

Contrasting views of the connections and collaboration between mainstream and EOTAS providers

The data in this section point to varying but sometimes contrasting views of the connections and collaboration between mainstream schools and EOTAS providers. The participant below, representing one of the EOTAS centres, described the connections between EOTAS and mainstream as 'piecemeal':

It is piecemeal, of course it is. . . . Some schools wouldn't even be able to tell you what EOTAS is. Other schools that have used EOTAS centres, there are some who are very good in terms of the SENCO or the pastoral care will be in touch, [Name] 'could you send a report, . . . Can I arrange a visit? Can I come down and see them?' But they're on a list of things to do. And we're probably nearly three quarters of the way down that list of things to do. Does it need to be better? Yes, it does. (A3NI.10)

Furthermore, respondent A3NI.10 argued that sometimes this was not because the school was unwilling to maintain connections, especially for those young people who are dual registered between the mainstream school and the EOTAS centre, but rather, young people had had such an 'exhaustive and difficult', experience leading up to their placement that they preferred to limit or where possible sever connection to the school. This perspective was supported by another representative from an EOTAS centre:

Again, if you're asking me, I don't see the advantage in that because if a child has no intention of going back to mainstream school, what's the point. And generally speaking, the schools are too busy to come and visit them anyway. And if they do come visit, the children actually don't want to see somebody from the school because the relationship has got so bad. I mean, I had an issue where the teacher came from one of the local secondaries, and when the child saw them, they ran and climbed the fence to get away. (A3NI.12)

The extract below offers a number of insights. In the first instance, the representative from an official body points to a lack of young people in EOTAS being re-integrated back into mainstream and levies accusations that some schools are keen to 'wash their hands', of young people who are placed in EOTAS:

I think one of the biggest statistics that we could be looking at is the amount of reintegration of children when they attend EOTAS provision back into mainstream school, because I know from my experience, it's very, very limited. And once schools get the children out, and into a provision, they really do, you know, wash their hands of them. And, you know, I know that that the department's guidance on it is that there is this maintaining a link, but in reality, I don't see that happening. (A3NI.7)

However, the principal in the following extract offers a contrasting perspective, pointing to a reluctance to exclude and saw it only as a last resort when all other interventions have been exhausted:

If a child is leaving here, because of suspension, or behaviour, the only place they're going to is EOTAS or ... they're not going to another school. If a child, you know, if the behaviour is so bad here, and they're suspended X amount of times, I'm not fobbing them off on another colleague, because I should have undertaken every strategy that I can, before they leave me and if they leave me in many instances, and they're excluded, I don't rub my hands and go God, that's great, we got rid of them. I also feel sad and think, I'm really disappointed that we couldn't meet that child's needs. . . . So I think, you know, there's a moral responsibility in terms of suspensions and exclusions to make sure that you have treated the people with dignity and respect and that you have also exhausted every strategy that you have in your school to make sure that this is the best outcome for everybody. (Principal School 5)

There did appear to be some level of collaboration between EOTAS and mainstream schools, and this seemed to take various forms. This included EOTAS staff offering support and guidance to mainstream schools and assisting schools with the processes of referrals:

In the last four or five years, we have needed support through EOTAS, and to get children placed because they just couldn't access and cope with school life. And it was having a detrimental effect on others, as well as staff members. And there was no school benefit to them being in school here. On those two occasions, EOTAS have always been very quick to support us. (School 7, Principal)

And in the case of younger students (aged 11–14), some talked about a 'Key Stage 3 partnership model' which involved working collaboratively to re-integrate pupils back into mainstream schools after temporary placements in EOTAS. In the extract below, the EOTAS representative reflects on this emerging model whereby mainstream schools and EOTAS collaborate to maintain connections and where possible students continue to take some subjects in mainstream and attend EOTAS provision with the aim of re-integrating back into mainstream:

I have some schools who have been great, and who have jumped on board with the model. And now it's almost becoming standard practice that when I get a pupil from their school, they're going, right, she can come in to do hair and beauty. And he's gonna come in and do cuisine. . . . It's up to me to build these relationships with the principals and then get the support from above to keep this model running, because I think it is a very effective model. (A3NI.13)

Despite these examples of collaboration between schools and EOTAS centres, evidence suggests this collaboration is limited. A recent report from the Education and Training Inspectorate (2021, p. 4) identified 'shortcomings in partnerships with mainstream schools including very limited re-integration of [Key Stage 4] [aged 14–16] KS4 back to their referring school'. The evidence points to EOTAS providers offering services and support to schools but limited, if any, evidence of mainstream schools offering support to EOTAS centres in return. The evidence also suggested there were few enduring connections between schools and EOTAS centres for pupils who were dual registered and therefore officially still connected to both.

Lack of resources and declining budgets limit the capacity of schools and the potential of integrated services to support young people in schools and communities

Despite points of dissonance between participants as discussed above, and in particular around themes related to inclusion, inflexible systems and disconnects between EOTAS provision and mainstream schools, there was broad consensus among the different groups of participants that schools were operating in challenging budgetary circumstances. This limited the capacity of schools (and related bodies) to make early interventions and to offer support for those at risk of exclusion; EOTAS provision was underfunded and training and professional development for teachers in this area was limited. The extended extract below from the Principal of School 6 provides context regarding budgets and resources:

There are none [resources], and that is it in a nutshell . . . And what we can do is limited in terms of the resources that we have. . . . EOTAS itself is severely under-resourced. So, if you take a city like ours . . . if we take all the non-selective [schools] who would generally be seeking out that support . . . you're maybe talking 4,000 pupils to 5,000 pupils, and you would

hear that maybe there are eight places in EOTAS ... So, because of the resourcing it is becoming more difficult to get children onto EOTAS particularly for longer term placements and there are barriers put up all the time ... Educational psychology, where we're only given a certain number of hours per week or per year to use with Ed Psych and we have to make a decision whether we use those Ed Psych hours to produce a report to prove ... that a child can't manage themselves in a school setting ... and that's at the expense of maybe a child who we're looking at for dyslexia or other learning need as opposed to behaviour. (Principal School 6)

In the extract below, the representative from an official body spoke of compounding challenges facing schools through declining budgets, lack of staffing, young people presenting with more complex needs, and a lack of resources to make early interventions:

School's budget has decreased over a period of time. Where you normally would have had a wee bit of slippage to maybe have an additional member of staff and there are smaller class sizes ... Now what you're finding is schools are so overwhelmed by the class sizes, by the complexity of need, the numbers of children in the class that have special educational needs, the number of children that are displaying different behaviours, that very often a school finds themselves in a situation that it's [exclusion] their only choice at that particular time to be able to manage a situation. [A3NI.9]

Some of the principals and teachers also reported that when they were approached by the Education Authority or even Social Services to take a pupil who had either been expelled or was at risk or expulsion from another school, there appeared to be a reticence. Principals argued to do so required additional resources to cover additional support services such as personnel within the school. Principal 2 highlighted 'I'm not going to bring a child in when I don't have the resources' to support the child 'because I think that's unfair to the child'. On the same theme, Principal 1 argued that requests to take a pupil into their school required additional resources, and at times decision-making could be hampered because of insufficient information about the young person and the context surrounding their expulsion from another school:

We can't make a decision on what's best for that young person unless we're in possession of the full facts ... if social services want a school to take a child, they need to tell you everything, and EA, and DE need to give us the resources to support that young person. (Principal School 1)

Teachers identified that there was little in the way of explicit or external training or professional development opportunities being offered in relation to behavioural support and exclusion. Some pointed to an expectation that they undertake their own professional development, and others pointed to a lack of resources that could be used to provide sub-cover to enable teachers time away from the classroom to train.

Lastly, a representative of an official education body argued that a lack of resources and reduced budgets across the system were having a detrimental impact on the capacity of integrated services to support at-risk young people beyond the remit of the school and into the community:

We work with the NGOs, we work with the community and voluntary sector. ... If the infrastructure is being threatened, and the resources are being depleted, they're not going to be there. If you're not working on the ground in the grassroots and if you're not working in local communities ... because you work in local communities because you live in local communities you care about these young people, you care about these families. I would

have had the community workers on the ground going to the homes ... at night. I've had youth workers walking the streets at 4 in the morning, to make sure that a young person is safe, you know, so this is the difference. (A3NI.6)

Discussion and conclusion

The rationale for this paper was driven by a need to address an obvious gap in the research on school exclusion within Northern Ireland, compared to the other jurisdictions of the UK and, in doing so, contribute to a UK-wide investigation of school exclusion. The review of the literature from Northern Ireland revealed a number of significant gaps, including little evidence on the perspectives of educational practitioners, school leadership and system leaders. This paper presents a sample of perspectives from these stakeholders and a critical analysis of the intersection of their perspectives on school exclusion. The UK-wide Excluded Lives research will also present the perspectives of children who have been excluded and their families – publications are forthcoming.

The paper reveals a dilemma. Official exclusion rates are consistently low in Northern Ireland which suggests policy success. However, we argue that policy and official guidance on school exclusion and related policies on behaviour and pastoral care are dated and require revision. Furthermore, the evidence presented here demonstrates that, while official exclusion figures may be consistently low, unofficial exclusionary practice was common in the schools that participated in the study and is likely to be reflective of the wider school system. These unofficial forms of exclusion are not recorded and, as such, we have only a partial view of the situation.

The paper argues that principals attempted to reframe or even legitimise certain forms of unofficial exclusion. Decisions not to record certain forms of exclusion may involve deliberate attempts to mask such practice, but the practice might also be symptomatic of limitations in the existing policy and guidance. In some cases, informal exclusions were used because they were more convenient and easier to manage, requiring less paperwork. In other situations schools opted to use unofficial approaches so that a young person did not have a formal record of suspension. In other cases, decisions to unofficially exclude appeared to stem from moral decision-making whereby principals were required to make best interest decisions to send a pupil home for the rest of the day and to find a balance between easing pressure on teachers in the classroom and de-escalating tensions between pupil and teacher or between pupils.

It is possible that principals use unofficial exclusions because there is a perception that such measures work, that they have utility. However, more research is required. For the most part, the data presented here point to schools using unofficial exclusion with good intentions, but it is not clear if the unofficial (and official) forms of exclusion are actually effective in terms of preventing further exclusions or impacting positively on behaviour. Furthermore, research in this area has neglected to investigate post-exclusion practices such as re-integration or restorative practices and whether these are also effective in terms of reducing future exclusions or addressing challenging behaviours.

In terms of the political economy of school exclusion in Northern Ireland, when we examine the intersection of perspectives between teachers, school leaders, alternative education providers and those representing official bodies, there are clear tensions in

the system. Schools were described as being inflexible in terms of meeting the needs of young people with social, emotional and behavioural needs. Interestingly, some of the EOTAS providers described how they were able to be adaptable, arguing that mainstream schools could not offer young people the same types of flexibility. They cited examples such as flexible timetabling, allowing young people to go home early and where needed temporarily separating young people from a particular teacher or enabling them to change subjects. Many of these approaches are described as flexible approaches but are also the same types of actions that in mainstream schools are deemed as unofficial exclusions. There appears to be a contradiction here that in one part of the system these are forms of exclusion, but in another they are forms of flexibility.

Accusations also emerged that schools were not as inclusive as they could be, that they readily used unofficial exclusions and were keen to 'wash their hands' of young people who had been referred to EOTAS centres. The connectivity and levels of collaboration between mainstream schools and EOTAS providers appears to be limited and under-developed. EOTAS is an important systemic resource. There is a wealth of expertise in terms of educating and supporting young people with complex needs and there are missed opportunities in terms of connecting EOTAS and mainstream educators. This could offer key professional development opportunities, improve the connectivity between mainstream and EOTAS providers and promote the reintegration of more young people back into mainstream provision.

Schools, on the other hand, point to a lack of official support and suggest that the systems or processes associated with exclusion are inflexible and overly bureaucratic. There is also the possibility that this reframing and legitimisation of unofficial exclusion is an outworking of the pressure on schools, including declining budgets, inflexible systems, and the limited availability of services for young people, in particular, counselling and mental health provision. The use of unofficial exclusion might also imply that schools do not feel the official system works, either because it is basically dysfunctional or because they are not given the level of support or resource they think they would need in order to make it work.

While the tensions are obvious, the evidence from this paper also reveals a consensus about the detrimental impact of declining budgets in schools, under-funded EOTAS provision and a lack of resources more generally across the system. According to participants, this is impacting on the capacity of services and agencies to collaborate and integrate to support at-risk and vulnerable young people in education or beyond, in the community. There do not appear to be the resources and time for dedicated professional development training for teachers on school exclusion and behaviour support.

More research on exclusion is needed in Northern Ireland and farther afield. Unofficial approaches tend not to be subject to evaluation or assessment because they are by nature unofficial or hidden. As a consequence, we are not yet in a position to properly understand the intended goals of such practice or test whether these goals are being achieved. A deeper understanding of informal practice could actually unearth examples of school-based innovation and next practice, contributing to more inclusive changes in guidance and policies.

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