



IS EXCLUSION REALLY THE ANSWER?

Fintan O'Regan asks why, after a period of decline, the number of primary pupils being excluded is starting to rise again...

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The overall trend in recent years has been a decrease in the number permanent exclusions. Where there have been increases, however, the highest have occurred in primary school – such as the 870 permanent exclusions in 2013/14, up from 670 in 2012/13.

'Persistent disruptive behaviour' (PDB) is the most commonly cited reason for permanent exclusions, accounting for 32.7% of the total.

There's also been an increase in the number of fixed term exclusions, from 267,520 in 2012/13 to 269,480 in 2013/14. 78% of those occurred in secondary schools, but it's worth noting the considerable rise of fixed term exclusions at primary over the same period – from 37,870 in 2012/13 to 45,010 in 2013/14. PDB is again cited as the most common cause, accounting for 25.3% of the total.

From those figures, one might come away with the impression that things are improving in secondary schools but getting worse in primaries. Credit is certainly due to the efforts secondary schools are putting in to reducing their exclusions, but then they have a greater capacity to offer alternative provision to pupils who may be at risk, compared with some primary schools.

What does PDB mean?

In current practice, PDB tends to be applied to a range of pervasive (and to some extent predictable), yet consistently inappropriate behaviours, as opposed to one-off actions such as physical or verbal assault or damage to property.

However, given that the definition varies from school to school, it follows that there may be significant variation in the criteria being applied when making the decision to exclude a pupil, which may

make interpreting inter-school comparisons of exclusion statistics somewhat difficult.

It's worth highlighting here the prevalence of ADHD – one of the most common childhood neurodevelopmental disorders there is, which is estimated by NICE to affect between 3% and 9% of school-age children and young people across the UK. ADHD is typically characterized by symptoms such as a failure to pay close attention to schoolwork, an inability to listen when spoken to directly and a tendency to leave a classroom without permission.

Those symptoms closely resemble the types of disruptive behaviours often associated with school exclusion. If manifested over a prolonged period of time, such behaviours may place a child at risk of exclusion, particularly if the underlying cause of these behaviours is not recognized and appropriately managed.

Although the relationship between ADHD and school exclusion has not as yet been well studied, the available evidence suggests that rates of exclusion are indeed higher among children who have been diagnosed with ADHD than in the general school population (Daniels & Porter, 2007 – see tinyurl.com/dp07-adhd).

Unrecognized ADHD may also help to explain in part the disproportionate rates of school exclusion among boys compared with girls. Boys are over three times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion, and nearly three times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion. Published studies have further shown that ADHD diagnosis rates are higher among males than females, and that girls are at a lower risk for disruptive behaviour disorders.

The way forward

So how should we respond? A child's first fixed-term disciplinary exclusion could perhaps present the first opportunity to detect such disorders. Early intervention by the school or teacher, with subsequent screening and diagnosis carried out by a medical professional, may help many disruptive behaviours from becoming persistent.

That diagnosis may in turn help to circumvent the avoidable burdens of multiple fixed-term exclusions or even permanent exclusion. Improving the level of training received by teachers in this area will also help to identify children at risk of behavioural disorders before the problem escalates further.

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