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## Inclusion and school exclusion – Key Issues for SENCos in England

### Defining Exclusion

The sanction of exclusion has been subject to much attention across a variety of fora. It is a sanction that is frequently associated with disruptive or challenging behaviour (Kane, 2011; Munn, Lloyd and Cullen, 2000; Pomeroy, 2000). Exclusion may be employed as a fixed-period exclusion, in which a specific length of time for which the pupil is excluded is identified, or a permanent exclusion from the school's roll. Fixed-period exclusions may also exclude children & young people for a period of the day, such as for lunchtimes, over a particular period of time. The Department for Education (DfE) provides statutory guidance for schools in which the phrase "barred from school" is utilised to describe exclusion (DfE 2017, p.56). This conveys the notion of an enforced banishment (Kane, 2005; Cooper *et al.* 2000), that is echoed within Hodkinson's (2012, p.678) construct of exclusion as a "forced absence of children from their classrooms" during which they are not perceived to be the responsibility of the teacher. The authors define exclusion as a sanction which may be employed by schools, within the remit of school leaders and governors. Exclusion means that learners are banished from attending school or from learning or social activities with their peers within the school environment. (Middleton and Kay, 2020, p.3)

Exclusion may also be implemented by schools as an informal or internal event. Informal exclusion is enacted by schools when they request that a pupil leave the school or not to come in to school for a period of time and do not follow formal exclusion procedures. Such actions are clearly identified in statutory guidance as an unlawful exclusion:

'Informal' or 'unofficial' exclusions, such as sending a pupil home 'to cool off', are unlawful, regardless of whether they occur with the agreement of parents or carers. Any exclusion of a pupil, even for short periods of time, must be formally recorded. (DfE 2017).

Internal Exclusion is a "short to medium-term strategy, used in response to learner challenges to schools' behaviour or discipline policies. It is an approach which moves the

child or young person away from learning alongside their peers to a situation where they are constrained to a specific room or area for extended periods as a consequence of their actions” (Middleton and Kay, 2020, p.X). One manifestation of this strategy is seclusion units or rooms, especially in secondary schools. There is little statutory guidance for internal exclusion or seclusion rooms.

### Current Context in England

Underlying the attention accorded to exclusion are some statistics from the DfE which present a stark picture in which the most vulnerable pupils comprise the largest proportion of children and young people who have been excluded from school. Table 1 shows two examples of this: the comparison of pupils with and without SEN and the high proportion of pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs who are excluded (Middleton and Kay, 2020).

Proportion	Permanent	Fixed-period
SEN Pupils as a percentage of all exclusions	45%	43%
Percentage of pupils with SEN Support who are excluded	0.35%	14.76%
Percentage of pupils with ECH Plan who are excluded	15.93%	15.93%
Percentage of pupils with NO SEN who are excluded	0.06%	3.06%
Percentage of pupils with SEMH SEN who are excluded	1.02%	46.26%

Table 1: Exclusions examined in relation to Pupils with SEN (adapted from DfE (2019, p.5, section 5 & table 6 accessed from the DfE website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2017-to-2018> ).

Analysis of this data suggests that children and young people who start from a disadvantaged position, in relation to other peers in their cohort at school, are at risk of further challenges to their academic and social learning. This is owing to the interruptions to their education as a result of the exclusion. These interruptions elicit barriers to relationships with adults and peers within their school and augments risk factors affecting self-belief, self-esteem, resilience and mental health (Middleton and Kay, 2019).

It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the scale of informal exclusions. The Children's Commissioner (2017) used the NFER Teacher Voice survey of over 1000 teachers to explore the situation and identified that thousands of children have been affected. With regard to children with SEN the Children's Commissioner identified that; "2.7 per cent of schools have sent children with statements of SEN home when their carer or teaching assistant is unavailable; if these were evenly spread across the country, it would represent 650 schools, or an average of more than four in every local authority" (Children's Commissioner 2017, p.25). This compounds the picture already provided by the statistics regarding formal exclusion from the DfE.

Education policy is subject to frequent change and the development of policy is influenced by a range of interacting factors such as culture, political beliefs, societal views and the economic climate. The enactment of inclusion and exclusion within schools is influenced by the wider policy context and the broader environment in which schools operate (Brodie, 2001).

Government policy since the 1990s has been underpinned by a desire to reduce the role of the state within education and institute market forces within the education sector, which is predicated upon schools and settings being constructed as businesses (Ball, 2013). The application of market-forces within the education sector is often described as quasi-market owing to the fact that state schools provide education free of charges and are not-for-profit organisations (Hayden, 1997). Supporters of the quasi-market focus upon education

policy emphasise the positive impact this has upon effectiveness, independence and efficiency of schools (Ball, 2006, 2013). Our professional experience has witnessed circumstances in which schools have understated their inclusive practice in order to ensure that students with potential to achieve good attainments are attracted to the school and deter those with SEN or who present with challenging behaviour. This aligns with the analysis from Ball (2013) regarding the influence market forces has upon schools' values.

In contrast to the reduction of state control through the introduction of market forces, the National Curriculum, first introduced by the 1988 Education Act and subject to several revisions since that time, bestows greater central control. Alongside the National Curriculum and other curricular guidance, formal assessment measures have been implemented (for example Standardised Assessments Tests [SATs]). Overtime, the focus upon factors that can be measured and evaluated has widened and augmented within policy (Ball, 2013). The identification of metrics that are used to set targets and inform accountability judgements has engendered processes for appraisal of the performance of schools and individual practitioners at all levels of seniority. This philosophy has been encapsulated by Ball (2013, p.57) as "... a culture or system of "terror".'

The emphasis upon attainment within evaluation of school, practitioner and pupil performance has been argued to elicit a focus upon deficit models of diverse needs (within learner deficits), as opposed to exploring how adjustments in their approaches or to the learning environment could be implemented (Glazzard, 2011; Hall *et al*, 2004).

Furthermore, the value placed on social relationships within policy becomes considerably reduced as increased value is accorded to measurable attainments (Ball, 2006). Ball (2006) notes that a performative culture encourages decision-making about investment to focus upon those areas which will lead to improved outcomes against the metrics used to evaluate school effectiveness. This, he suggests, means that the likelihood of SEN being considered for significant investment is reduced owing to the likely poor or limited return. One example of this has been provided by a report from Schools Week in which the CEO of Greenwood Academy Trust argued that schools who have low exclusion rates may be negatively rewarded owing to the impact upon their statistics for formal assessment results, which form a key part of external accountability metrics; this appears to be a

negative reward for a determination to avoid excluding or off-rolling children (Schools Week report 15<sup>th</sup> November 2019). This is compounded by the potential for expected attainments for age-related expectations for all children and young people to effectively marginalise learners with SEN owing to the specified attainments being inappropriate for some learners with SEN (O'Brien, 2016). As SENCOs and other professionals, we need to challenge these notions - all children and young people should have our investment and best practice.

Government policy that has focused upon school improvement has formed part of wider dialogue about upon issues related to social exclusion. This has been part of a recognition that exclusion is not just about the individual but is a matter of concern for wider society thus necessitating political intercession and changes to systems. The beliefs held by policy makers regarding underlying causations of challenging behaviour informs the development of policies within schools and nationally. These causations are usually attributed to internal or external factors (Munn, Lloyd and Cullen, 2001). Examples of external factors include school and wider societal issues. Munn, Lloyd and Cullen (2000) postulate that policy and legislation expose the tensions between the focus upon the individual (need for intervention, therapeutic approaches or punitive sanctions) and the focus upon systems (national and school-based).

Government policy and regulations address a multitude of components which influence pedagogical decision-making; these include the curriculum, standards, inclusion, behaviour and exclusion. These contrasting elements elicit tensions for schools and “within this pressure, there is a dichotomy in the discourse around exclusion between the notions of it being weak and positive practice” (Middleton and Kay, 2020, p.25).

### **Exclusion regulations and SEN**

The DfE statutory guidance for exclusion reminds schools that they “must not discriminate against, harass or victimise pupils because of ...disability....For disabled children, this includes a duty to make reasonable adjustment to policies and practices and the provision of auxiliary aids” (DfE, 2017, p.9 section 9). The regulations state that these responsibilities (set out within the Equality Act 2010) must be adhered to within decision-making related

to exclusion. In addition, Headteachers are required to comply with the SEND Code of Practice and advised that it is “unlawful to exclude a pupil simply because they have additional needs or a disability that the school feels it is unable to meet” (DfE, 2017, p.9 section 13). Furthermore, the regulations set out the expectation that exploration to identify factors that underlie disruptive behaviours should include investigation of whether SEN or disability is part of this. Multi-professional investigation offers a holistic approach to identifying the causal factors of presenting behaviour.

The regulations acknowledge that there are some groups of pupils who are subject to “disproportionately high rates of exclusion” and states that the sanction of permanent exclusion should be avoided for pupils with EHC Plans (DfE, 2017, p.11 section 23). Schools are advised to work in partnership with parents in their work to support the behaviour of learners with SEN. Additionally, at times where a learner with an EHC Plan is at risk of exclusion, schools are required to work collaboratively with others to explore and plan the provision for the learner, which may include an alternative setting. Schools are asked to consider arranging an early annual review (or interim review) meeting (DfE 2017, p.11 section 25).

### **The context of the SENCO and school exclusion.**

The high correlation between recorded school exclusion and learners identified with SEN has been made clear earlier in this chapter. These links mean that the SENCO is often a key practitioner in the lead-up to exclusion. As a leader on inclusion, the SENCO will frequently be in the position of overseeing plans and provision which are put in place at a school level with the aim of preventing exclusion, and with supporting a return to school following fixed-term exclusion.

The definition of inclusion is widely contested and the debate is subject to sensitive political implications. As such, the role taken by the SENCO and the plans made for learners at risk of exclusion are varied and open to debate. This can place the SENCO in a difficult or vulnerable position within their school setting.

Media attention has highlighted the view that a number of schools may be using exclusionary practices in order to reduce the negative impact on published whole-school outcomes which are communicated through records of attainment in national tests. These practices include:

- internal exclusion, through the use of isolation booths and rooms, as a way of removing particular learners from the classroom setting to enable ‘teachers to teach and learners to learn’;
- the use of strict behaviour regimes with swift routes towards school exclusion;
- off-rolling, which Ofsted (2019) has identified as a growing concern;
- various degrees of unwelcoming and unaccommodating responses to admissions requests from parents of learners with SEN.

The SENCO has a duty to ensure that, “pupils with SEN receive appropriate support and high quality teaching” (DfE/DoH, 2015 Section 6.89) and this responsibility can often be found at odds with the exclusionary practices identified above.

The skills and understanding of the SENCO place them in a unique position in schools. More often than not, practitioners become a SENCO as a result of an interest or affinity with learners who are marginalised or disadvantaged. Through Career Professional Development and, more specifically, having completed the National SENCO Award, they are empowered to see special educational needs through a lens of inclusion, recognising that difference is not a byword for inability or limitation. Instead they can recognise the attributes and benefits of diversity and they have the knowledge of theory and practices to be able to identify practice which enables learners to access their educational potential. This perspective means that, at one level, the SENCO is in the position to be the advocate for the needs of learners with SEN, often taking a different perspective to other school leaders, by forefronting holistic needs and the possibility of alternative practices.

Furthermore, the SENCO’s holistic perspective means that they are often the practitioner who spends a significant amount of time working with the parents & carers of learners with SEN. This is an element of practice which was strengthened by the SEN Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). Work with parents & carers often provides the SENCO with new

and refreshed perspectives on learner's needs and possible provision and further adds to their position of advocacy.

Through implementing practices, such as Person-Centred Planning for meetings (Corrigan, 2014), the SENCO can be seen as advocating for the voice of the learner and facilitating self-advocacy (Garner & Sandow, 2018).

The SENCO, as a leader overseeing the enactment of the principles of the SEN Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015), is in a position to have a positive systemic impact on the exclusion of learners, through the implementation of approaches in their setting, including interventions, staffing and the development of ethos and vision. Such approaches are often instrumental in providing opportunities for learners to successfully remain in mainstream educational settings. Whilst it can be tempting to provide best practice approaches, recommending specific practice, the authors believe that appropriateness and relevance of specific ways of working can only be determined on a local, or contextual, basis. As such, what is needed is a SENCO who is equipped to make choices about approaches, through an understanding of what is available to them and what the outcomes might be, within the parameters of their conception of inclusion. This could be described as a high level of inclusive practice literacy, or intervention-literacy.

### **Definitions of Inclusion**

The SENCO, as a leader of inclusion, needs a solid understanding of the concept of inclusive education in order to lead the development of ethos and vision. This section will explain the authors' conceptualisation of inclusive practice.

Literature has moved forwards from the principles of the Salamanca Agreement (UNESCO, 1994), understanding that inclusive education cannot primarily be defined by the learners' placement, but that inclusive education embraces a number of factors (Mitchell, 2015).

The authors identify the following as a theoretical framework through which to conceptualise inclusive education (fig 1)



**Fig 1 (Middleton & Kay, 2020, p.68)**

This framework is grounded within a particular conceptualisation of the purpose of education (Ekins, 2017) which moves away from a didactic approach focusing on the teaching of specific knowledge and skills and therefore measuring success in terms of norms related to these areas (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010), towards a view of education as one based on principles of equity (Lumby and Coleman, 2016) . The six dimensions are concisely elaborated upon below.

**Learning and Difference**

Learning is fundamentally based within difference, through its concerns of exploring different approaches, positions and perspectives and moving us from one state of being to another, meaning we are different following a learning event. The benefits of difference, or diversity, within communities of learning is key to conceptualising inclusive education. Furthermore, as identified by astrophysicist Dame Bell Burnell, diversity is an asset in learning situations; “The more diverse a group is, the more robust, the more flexible, and the more successful it is” (Bell Burnell, 2018).

### **Social Justice and Human Rights**

This dimension is based on the belief that there are core human rights and that a focus upon social justice will ensure these rights are reached. Article 22 of the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) identifies that education is a human right and that this will promote peaceful and tolerant communities.

### **Humanism**

The dimension of Humanism is one which values relationships between humans with the belief that humans are fundamentally ethical beings who are concerned with the others and are motivated to act with care for others rather than engage in competitive individualism (Slee, 2014 p.11).

### **Creativity**

Creativity is the concept which is the antithesis of the dogmatic, normative approach to education. It is the belief that diversity and variation in outcomes is the most valuable goal of education which seeks to create new learning and development.

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment, or the development of individuals' voices and opportunities for decision-making is both a route towards, and an outcome of, inclusive education. In order to ensure that diversity is valued and provided for, the voice of diverse learners need to be heard and acted upon. As this happens, and learning opportunities for different learners are enhanced, those learners will become further equipped to develop their voice and access to decision making opportunities.

### **Praxis**

Praxis is a term which describes the use of evidence-informed practice which is employed in order to reduce marginalisation and improve the participation and engagement of all.

This model of dimensions is designed to help the practitioner to explore inclusive education practice from the basis of a secure understanding. The SENCO can then effectively engage in the process of developing their school to support and benefit all learners (Kurth et al., 2018 p.472). This approach to changing the educational systems and structures to fit with the needs of all learners in the community, is a useful perspective

from which to understand inclusive education and to reduce exclusion for diverse learners. Through this understanding SENCOs will be empowered to reduce formal and informal exclusions as well as exclusion by default, where learners remain in school but are marginalised by practice which aims to integrate (Barton, 2003) rather than develop.

### **Leading SEN: supporting colleagues with using inclusive approach to reduce school exclusion**

Translating or mediating the concept of inclusion into practice engages schools in capacity building (Norwich 2013) and this is a crucial part of the strategic leadership of SEN and inclusion. The authors contend that inclusive practice is about finding spaces that are “occupied by (relatively) inclusive values and approaches’ (Dyson, Gallannaugh and Millward, 2003 p.238) and working collaboratively with colleagues to engage in reflective thinking and dialogue to support the development of inclusive practice. These spaces are not intended to refer to the literal physical interpretation, but rather time and an ethos of a safe space to engage in critical reflection and discussion which challenges everyone’s thinking and looks to explore creative approaches to resolve issues in practice (Middleton and Kay, 2020). These spaces, and the ideas and resolutions facilitated through them, offer opportunity and hope for finding inclusive approaches to meeting diverse needs and thus reducing exclusion (Middleton and Kay, 2020). Ekins (2015) advocates for the importance of leaders engaging their teams with a critical analysis of, and reflection upon, the principles and values which are the foundations for their current practice. This may appear challenging within the large number of demands upon schools and the work to develop practice. However, we contend that this serves the important purposes of:

- an ethos that has a positive embracement of diversity
- developing a shared vision owned by all the school community regarding inclusion
- keeping the ethos active.

This work needs to be a collaborative endeavour; it is not something that can be imposed from top down (Alila, Maatta and Uusiautti, 2016). Leading and shaping a shared understanding of inclusion and inclusive practice for the school or setting will be supported positively through dialogical relationships (Watson *et al.*, 2012). The notion of safe spaces embodies one in which deep listening, honesty and courteous dialogue is adopted and

respected by everyone within the community (Middleton and Kay, 2020). Booth and Ainscow's (2002) broad principles for inclusion:

- reduce barriers to inclusion
- increase participation and access to learning
- support diversity

offer a supportive tool for analysing current practice.

The dimensions of the framework for an approach to inclusive education offer a useful lens to support reflect dialogues about practice. We have developed a framework for inclusive practice which contains questions to support reflective thinking targeted to inclusive practice (Middleton and Kay, 2020). This is not intended as an audit tool. Here we present some questions which can support with reflecting upon leadership of SEN and pedagogy. The questions can be used for self-reflection and as group or whole staff meeting discussions. SENCOs act as advocates for children with SEN and disabilities most especially at times of challenge, such as when behaviour places a child at risk of exclusion. Exploring practice in this way through the use of critical reflective spaces, SENCOs can work with school staff to develop (or make different choices) for pedagogical practice.

Framework for Reflection (adapted from Middleton and Kay, 2020, p.X)



## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the case that exclusion is an issue that needs to be of particular concern for the school SENCO and that the practice of exclusion is one aspect of a system which contributes to the marginalisation of particular learners who come under the remit of the SENCO. We have argued that a secure understanding of inclusive practice provides a firm basis from which to tackle exclusionary practices and that the SENCO, as a leader of inclusion, needs to create spaces in which practitioners can explore and negotiate their contextual understanding of inclusive practice for their own settings.

We suggest that as SENCOs are reading through these chapters they may find the following questions about their own practice useful;

- What is the current situation in your setting in relation to formal and informal exclusion?
- How does your school data in relation to excluded pupils or those at risk of exclusion compare with the national data?
- How do you think the wider policy context influences inclusion and exclusion in your own school or setting?
- What investigations are undertaken currently in your setting when a concern is raised about disruptive behaviour?
- Do you know the external agencies you can reach out to for support in your local area?

Furthermore, a selection of a framework of questions (extracted from Middleton & Kay (2020)) has been presented to support SENCOs to open up dialogue to create the spaces to explore inclusive practice and support their work to reduce exclusion and promote beneficial practices and outcomes for learners identified with SEN.

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