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English schooling and little e and big E exclusion: what's equity got to do with it?

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ABSTRACT

It seems uncontentious that policy development should be informed by evidence, and that researchers should be engaged to assess available evidence. In this paper, we tell the story of a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) about school exclusion, a task intended to inform a 'root and branch' policy review. Drawing on Carol Bacchi's '*What's the problem?*' approach, we use the project brief and the changing texts that we wrote to show that, while we began reviewing literature with a generous definition of exclusion, our focus progressively narrowed to encompass only the literatures that fitted with the pre-existing policy definition. Our story shows that a need to focus on big E Exclusion policy eliminated insights about little e exclusion, in particular how wider social relations and the school itself were implicated. The case raises critical questions about how policy evidence about exclusion is produced – and limited.

Introduction

When students are suspended, excluded or expelled, schools must follow a range of administrative procedures spelled out in legislation and associated administrative guidelines; enacting these processes may involve personnel outside of school. There are knock-on resource allocations as specialist services and alternative education provision are called on to ensure that students' entitlement to education is met. Governments face significant consequences if they do not attend to the ways in which exclusion, suspension, and expulsion are managed. Finances and public credibility can be damaged by burgeoning numbers of children and young people out of school, and/or by indications that loopholes in regulations are being exploited. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that governments regularly review the administrative frameworks related to exclusion, suspension and expulsion and seek evidence about the ways in which school practices may or may not adhere to requirements.

In this paper, we tell the story of our involvement in a Department for Education (DfE) commissioned research project that investigated alternative education provision for young people excluded from school in England. The research was part of a broader review into school discipline, exclusion and alternative provision. Our role was to provide a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) on exclusion and effective preventive measures. In undertaking the REA, we were positioned as evidence-producers for policy-making.

The UK government espouses the use of research evidence in policy-making. Researchers in the UK are urged to engage with the production of evidence for policy, and to develop research projects with impact in mind (Penfield et al. 2014). There is a burgeoning literature that exemplifies how

researchers have produced persuasive evidence which changes policies and practices (Dunleavy and Tinkler 2020; Reed 2018). There is also discussion about the complexity of policy-making and some accounts which query how much policy-makers take heed of research (Belfiore 2021; Carney 2016). However, there are relatively few accounts of the ways in which the evidence production process takes place and even fewer about researchers' failure to influence policy. This paper offers just such an account, a case where two researchers did not produce the kind of research-based evidence that government wanted, and thus failed to productively influence policy-making.

As two scholars working in England but who developed their understandings of social justice and education in Australia, we brought a perspective on exclusion that did not always sit easily with the DfE. In this paper, we first outline the Australian context, which shaped our understandings, then move to the current context in England, before employing Foucault and Bacchi to analyse the writing of the REA for the *Investigative research into alternative provision* (IFF Research Ltd, Mills, M., & Thomson, P 2018). From this analysis, we will argue that a previous policy-induced focus on what we call big E exclusion, without consideration of little e exclusion, works to deny the complex educational ecologies that lead to students being formally removed from class and school.

Education policy and exclusion in Australia

Internationally, the term exclusion was initially, and most commonly, used to challenge the routine segregation of children and young people designated as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) from peers in mainstream schools (Kavale and Forness 2000). Histories of inclusion and exclusion in the US (Lipsky and Gartner 1997) and UK (Lauchlan and Greig 2015) suggest that the focus was first on integration – students categorised as SEN needed to have access to mainstream provision – and then moved to inclusion – SEN students must participate fully in schooling to ensure they have equitable life opportunities (Komesaroff and McLean 2006). The problematisation of exclusion as lack of access and participation led to widespread changes in special education provisions, including: the closure of special schools and classes; the development of official (medicalised) procedures for diagnosis of need; the provision of additional in-class support for students; and a range of specialist intervention programmes (Kaufmann 2020) . Despite these changes, concerns and debates about the continuation of less overt exclusion practices remained, inter alia: dismissing the benefits of disability cultures (Hall 2002); school organisation; othering and stigmatisation of particular students; lack of professional capacity to provide for the full range of needs in mainstream schools; and the continued use of non-mainstream educational provision (Ainscow 1999; Frederickson and Cline 2009). The latter is highly germane to this paper.

The Australian tradition of problematisation of exclusion is different and distinctive from this international approach. In Australia, the term exclusion came to prominence in relation to the education of girls. The second wave of the women's movement brought renewed interest in girls and their education everywhere, but took a particular Australian turn (see Eisenstein 1984; Yeatman 1990). The 1976 report *Girls, School and Society* (Schools Commission 1975), steered by the late Jean Blackburn, focused on the then comparatively poor educational outcomes of girls as compared to boys. The signs of gendered trouble were:

(1) Girls were less likely to stay at school for the full twelve years
(2) Girls took a narrower range of subjects in senior secondary years. Many took subjects, which were gender stereotypical, for example, 'commercial subjects'
(3) Schools thus did little to redress post-school outcomes – when they left school, girls went into a highly gender-segregated labour market in which they were paid less and had less chance of promotion.

The report offered a complex explanation for these concerns. The problem of low retention, narrow subject choice and restricted outcomes were shown to be the result of school practices. The school was not seen as a straightforward reflection of wider society, but an institution which actively mediated social relations and which thus had the capacity to offer some redress. While schooling might not resolve social inequality it could, the report argued, go some way towards widening opportunities.

The report did not argue that girls themselves or their families were the problem, although this was a direction taken in some subsequent interventions. By contrast the report, and subsequent government, professional and academic literatures (e.g. Ashenden et al. 1984; Connell et al. 1982; Kenway and Willis 1993; Lingard, Knight, and Porter 1993) argued that the school was a complex ecology in which a range of practices were implicated in the reproduction of gendered outcomes. Discussions of girls' education moved away from looking at sex-role stereotyping, role models and confidence building to the whole school, including: timetabling; language of instruction; assessment and task design; student grouping; subject and career counselling; lack of attention to identity-formation; teacher expectations; lack of women in positions of authority; and lack of agency and democratic process in the school which meant stereotypical behaviours could not be challenged or understood.

On the back of this problematisation, a plethora of national, state and school-based interventions were initiated and implemented (see Kenway et al. 1997; Yates 1993). There were two further developments. Firstly, the widespread use of the term exclusion led to the use of its binary other, inclusion. Inclusion was what schools and teachers did when they wanted to work against exclusion, and this usually involved an initial analysis of exclusionary practices, which were then subject to reform. Secondly, the analysis of exclusion extended to other population groups – students from a range of language and cultural heritages, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in poverty, geographically isolated students and students framed by a variety of Special Educational Needs categories. (e.g. Commonwealth Schools Commission 1985; Commonwealth Schools Commission Disadvantaged Schools Programme 1978; Holdsworth 1986; Schools Council 1993).

The problem of exclusion was different for each of the population groups. The school remained the responsible institution, and curriculum, assessment, administrative and organisational practices, staffing decisions and decision-making remained the major 'levers' for change. However, the details of the problem, and therefore the focus for reform, varied.

Australian academic researchers interested in exclusion/inclusion were also integral to the ways in which evidence of the problem and change was constructed (e.g.Harwood 2005; Mills 2004; Slee 1995, 1998). *The International Journal of Inclusive Education*, initiated and edited from Australia, was important in this endeavour – it takes the same broad ecological view of exclusion as the initial 1976 *Girls, School and Society* report. It is this generous and complex understanding of exclusion, sensitive to specifics and intersectionality and focused on the responsibility of education systems and the agency of schools and teachers, that we call 'little e' exclusion.

However, not all of 'little e exclusion' is carried into big E exclusion, as we now explain. In the remainder of the paper, we tell the story of big E exclusion and the production and reproduction of a very particular understanding of schooling and the reasons for and practices of excluding students. To tell this story, we draw on anonymous comments made by DfE personnel to various iterations of our report. First though, we outline some of the English context and the analytic approach we take.

Education policy, exclusion and alternative provision in England

Exclusion is generally the precursor to alternative provision. The REA focused on both.

Exclusion

In England, school exclusion has a legal definition. It can be permanent, when students are removed from school because a serious breach or persistent breaches of school behaviour policy have occurred, and where allowing the pupil to remain in school would be seen to seriously harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others in the school. Schools are also able to exclude students on a temporary basis for up to 45 days in a single academic year, if there is a strategy for reintegration. Schools may commission (that is pay for) alternative provision for students who are permanently or temporarily excluded, or who are seen as being at risk of being excluded. The classification of an excluded student does not, by definition, include those who are electively home-schooled, a legal process where a parent decides to remove their children from school (Bhopal and Myers 2018). Nor does it include students who are 'off-rolled', that is students whose schools take them off the roll without going through a formal process (Done and Knowler 2021). While academic researchers are likely to see all of these categories of students as excluded, this is not the case in any official DfE text or statistics. Exclusion refers specifically to students who have been through a formal process, which is documented and systemically monitored and audited.

DfE (Department for Education (DfE) 2020) data on exclusions and suspension for the 2018/2019 school year – the most recent reliable data (Department for Education (DfE) 2021) – show that while permanent exclusions had been rising year on year for the last five years, the number (around 7,900 students) and rate (0.10) stabilised. However, there was an increase in the number (438,265) and rate of fixed term exclusions (5.36) from the previous year (410,800, and 5.08). The rise was due to more secondary schools using fixed term exclusion. The same student can experience multiple fixed term exclusions and, according to the Department for Education (DfE) (2020), it was the repetition that led to the increase in numbers. Persistent disruptive behaviour is the most common cause given for both permanent (35%) and fixed term (31%) exclusions.

The official Department for Education (DfE) (2020) exclusion data show some important trends related to:

- Gender: Boys have three times more permanent exclusions than girls, although the rate of fixed term exclusion for girls is on the increase.
- Level of schooling: The largest number of students registered in both forms of exclusion is at age 14, also usually the start of a two-year General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE[1]).
- Poverty, as measured by Free School Meals (FSM[2]): The permanent exclusion rate of FSM students is 0.27 compared to 0.06 no FSM and fixed term exclusion is even greater with 13.76 FSM compared to 3.83 non-FSM.
- Special Educational Needs: Students with an education and health care plan are 0.15 of permanent exclusions, and 16.11 of fixed term exclusions; those who have special education support are 0.32 of permanent and 16.11 for fixed term exclusions.
- Race and ethnicity: Gypsy/Roma students had the highest rates of both permanent (0.39) and fixed period exclusions (21.26), followed by Travellers of Irish heritage at 0.27 and 14.63, respectively. The fixed period exclusion rate for Travellers of Irish heritage decreased from 17.42 to 14.63. The over-representation of Black British students remained stable.
- Location: Pupils are more likely to be permanently excluded if they live in the North East of the country, and least likely in the South East.

These data all point to the deep social inequities present in English schooling.

We discuss our concerns with a lack of attention to these trends in the DfE commissioned report in the next section. We note here that the only place that the words 'race', 'gender' and 'poverty' are used in that report are in the REA chapter that we wrote, and in the references for that chapter.

Alternative provision

Alternative provision (AP) in England caters to students who are permanently or temporarily excluded, or who are seen as being 'at risk' of being excluded from school. When schools exclude students, they usually pay for this service, intended to provide these young people with an education outside of the mainstream. In recent years, there has been an escalating demand for AP, due to the increased numbers of both permanent and fixed term exclusions combined with an explicit push from Ofsted[3] to get schools to take responsibility for students they enrol.

AP in England is not all of a kind. It can be state (local authority), charity or privately operated. It can be provided to students on a full- or part-time basis. It can be delivered off-site or on school grounds. For some students, it becomes a short-term stay (although 'recidivism' is high and hence returns frequent); for others it becomes their new permanent school. Many of the young people who attend alternative provision are there for behavioural issues. However, there are also some sites that enrol students unable to secure a mainstream school place, including refugees. Some young people are positive about their AP experience, others are highly critical and embarrassed about their attendance.

A number of concerns have been raised about AP. According to a government briefing paper (Danechi 2019), teachers in AP tend to be less qualified than those in the mainstream (in November 2017, 87% had qualified teacher status compared with 95% in the mainstream) and pupils are more likely to be taught by supply teachers. In some local authorities unqualified teachers in AP outnumber qualified teachers (Centre for Social Justice 2020). The breadth of curriculum and pedagogy are often limited (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014) and are often influenced by stereotypic constructions of gender, race and socioeconomic background (Gillies 2016; Thomson and Russell 2007).

Our research

The analysis presented here draws on Foucauldian discourse theory. Foucault argued that discourse was key to human understandings of the world. Discourse, which can be thought of as interlocking meaning-making practices, materialises knowledges in particular, historically and socially situated forms. Knowledges are not neutral but both produce and reproduce unequal societal power relations. Discourse is not only what is written and said, but also: what can be known and understood and what can't; what is prioritised and what is not; what it is possible to be and do and not; how the cultural and material world is organised and not; and the naming and framing of things, people, events, practices and relations (Foucault 1972, 1980, 1991).

We work with the analytic approach developed by feminist policy scholar Carol Bacchi, whose '*What's the problem*?' approach (Bacchi 2009) is informed by Foucault's theorisation of discourse (Bacchi 2000; Bacchi and Bonham 2014). Bacchi argues that the ways in which policy problems are posed leads logically to particular kinds of solutions. While both the problem-posing and the solution legitimise particular lines of thought, argumentation and actions, they simultaneously make alternatives harder to imagine, justify and develop. Bacchi suggests a set of questions that need to be asked of a policy or policy proposal. These are:

- What's the problem represented to be? What assumptions underpin this representation? How has this representation come to be? What is left unproblematic? For whom is this a problem?
- What effects are produced by this representation? Whose interests are met and whose not?
- Can the problem be thought about differently? How has this problem been produced and defended? How might it be questioned and transformed?

(Bacchi 2009, 2 our minor additions).

We brought these questions to our shared reading of various drafts of the REA on exclusion and alternative provision.

Investigative research into alternative provision

The *Investigative research into alternative provision* report had two parts: the Rapid Evidence Assessment and a mixed methods study – survey-interview-case study.[4] The aims of the research, as stated in the report, were to:

> . . . build the evidence based on current practice in AP, and consider whether, how and with what effect schools and AP settings take pupil characteristics into account throughout the process, from early identification of pupils at risk of being referred to AP, through to reintegrating pupils into mainstream provision. The key research objectives were to understand how schools support children at risk of exclusion; how schools use alternative provision; and how AP providers support children placed in their settings. (p. 9)

The report consisted of an Executive Summary, and seven chapters – an introduction and the Rapid Evidence Assessment (Ch2) with the remaining chapters reporting on empirical research. The empirical evidence was obtained through telephone interviews with 243 Headteachers or other senior leaders in mainstream primary and secondary schools (plus 33 with special school Headteachers) and with 200 Headteachers or their equivalents in AP; and through short (1–2 day) case studies of 25 AP settings, involving face-to-face interviews with Headteachers, staff and pupils, and a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews with parents. The Executive Summary, likely to be the most read section of the report, was heavily weighted towards the findings from the empirical investigation.

The Executive Summary reported on five areas, identifying strengths of current practices and problems:

(1) Identifying and supporting pupils at risk of exclusion.
Strengths included a holistic approach to individual circumstances, early intervention and a variety of internal responses to 'at riskness'. Problems included the availability and cost of external supports for students, and lack of evidence related to the effectiveness of prevention strategies.

(2) Referrals into AP
Strengths entailed phased introductions into AP, continuing involvement of the referring schools, and when the referral was directly from the school. Problems included the financial consequences of different types of exclusion which incentivised permanent exclusion over short fixed term exclusions, lack of transparency for parents/guardians and students in decisions related to referrals and about AP, and the stigma associated with attending AP.

(3) Delivering AP
Strengths involved small class sizes, personalised learning and support, confidence and well-being programmes, and a regular monitoring of progress. Problems were associated with curriculum breadth and depth, knowing what curricula students had previously experienced, and recruiting appropriate teachers.

(4) Reintegration to mainstream education
Most sites had reintegration into the mainstream as their goal. Strengths were good communication between parents and guardians, the AP provider and other professionals about the possibilities of reintegration given current levels of attendance, behaviour and academic outcomes. Problems occurred when mainstream schools were not willing to take the students back or enrol students who had been in AP, and a lack of resources available to AP to stay connected with the young people who were able to secure a place in the mainstream.

(5) Post-16 destinations

Strengths occurred when good career advice was 'delivered' and personal contacts were utilised to secure positive post-16 outcomes. However, a range of problems was identified including a lack of on-going support once a destination was secured, a lack of a universal reporting system and longitudinal data on destinations, and a narrow and restricted curriculum.

Most of this is not particularly surprising. The tensions between the holistic and pastoral and 360 degree monitoring systems, the nature of in-school alternatives (including the ironically named 'inclusion rooms'), the restricted curricula in AP, the lack of destination data, post 16 options being FE and apprenticeship and 'best practices' in referral already feature in prior evaluations and research (Bailey 2013; Kendall et al. 2007; Mills and McGregor 2014; Ogg and Kail 2010; Parsons 2011; Pirrie et al. 2009; Wright et al. 2005). However, the emphasis on schools' evaluating their own prevention and reintegration strategies is new and in line with an ongoing representation of the problem as one in which schools need to take more responsibility for students classified as at risk (e.g. Department for Education 2012; Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) 2014; OfSTED. (2011, 2013)).

Bacchi (2009) suggests that understanding the representation of policy problems requires the identification of silences within policy documents. There are three important silences within the executive summary of the report:

(1) Pupil characteristics. The only pupil characteristics that are explicitly mentioned in the Executive Summary are SEND, SEMH[5] needs and autism, although 'background and characteristics' are also mentioned as are violent behaviour and mental illness. Despite the presence of exclusion data about gender, poverty, race and ethnicity, these do not appear as pupil characteristics.
(2) Curriculum. Pedagogical and curriculum change are described in terms of specific GCSE subjects and as timetable, short courses, small class size, personal approach, and vocational/academic balance. Although inexplicit, equity thus appears to mean the same curriculum as offered in the mainstream schools and inclusion to mean staying on the mainstream school campus, albeit in a separate on-site room.
(3) Object of change. There is no suggestion in the summary or the wider paper that AP might offer learning for mainstream schools and mainstream curriculum and pedagogies. The locus of change is the student, and the school's pastoral efforts in retaining the student 'at risk'. There is no sense that the mainstream curriculum and pedagogy may be heavily implicated, and may exclude and lead to exclusion.

The report also included a Rapid Evidence Assessment – the focus of this section of the paper.

Rapid evidence assessment

Our primary responsibility in the project was for the delivery of the Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA). We were contracted to establish the 'volume and quality' of research evidence about school interventions and how schools used exclusion. In undertaking this review of the literature and the responses by the DfE to our earlier drafts, it became apparent that the DfE was working with what we are referring to as 'big E' exclusion rather than 'little e' exclusion, that is, its representations of the problem were grounded in concerns about student behaviour and untrustworthy schools and teachers (c.f. Tawell and McCluskey 2021).

An REA uses the hierarchy of types of research in common with a systematic review, but eliminates around relevance to a given topic, not on the basis of the hierarchy. The REA selects publications on the basis of their 'fit' with predetermined questions (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017; Grant and Booth 2009). The questions that guided this REA were:

- What are schools doing to help pupils at risk of exclusion?
- Why are pupils referred to Alternative Provision?
- How do schools use Alternative Provision?
- What is quality in Alternative Provision?
- What are the processes of exclusion and referral?
- How are pupils reintegrated into the mainstream?

This then was not a review of who was excluded from school and/or who was in alternative provision. The focus was very clearly on identification and intervention processes, the notion of 'quality', and the institutional linkages between schools and alternative provision. The omission of identified populations, or the sociological categories of class, race, gender, able-ness and neurotypicality, worked to support the generic classification of 'pupils at risk'. This focus and omissions all point to representations of the problem as either young people or some aspects of their schools, not in question were broader economic, social and political inequities.

Big E/little e

An early statement in the text represents one of our major learnings from doing the REA and also suggests the ways in which our interpretations were framed:

> It is important to note that the much of the academic literature uses the term exclusion quite broadly: the term exclusion usually includes formal exclusion, illegal exclusion, offsite direction and children who cannot attend school. (Where the literature addresses a particular population that population is specified in the REA.)
> p. 26

We repeated this message on the next page of the REA, saying 'It is important to note that many studies took a generalist view of exclusion and alternative provision'. But this REA was geared to produce evidence about the formal and legally defined processes of exclusion as outlined in government policy. Thus, the more general sociological analyses that showed how race and class gender relations were produced and reproduced through the selective practices of schooling were of far less interest than those which showed how schools identified and dealt with pupils at risk of formal exclusion.

Many of our concerns about marginalisation, stigmatisation, and systemic/systematic recognition and redistribution were negated by some within the DfE during the REA writing process. For example, we were told there was a 'blurring' of the meaning of 'exclusion' by referring to children who could not attend school for various reasons, including new mothers, and by noting concerns raised by both academics and the Children's Commission about 'illegal exclusions'. One official from the DfE informed the consulting research company we were working with to 'point this out to Martin and Pat, and to make the requisite changes to the REA'. Another official was very critical when we mentioned gender, and when we pointed out that whilst boys did experience the greatest number of exclusions, girls too experience exclusions (Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane 2017) that historically schools have been slow to recognise when girls are at risk (Lloyd 2005; Osler 2006; Osler and Vincent 2003), and that many schools have not had good records in supporting pregnant girls (Vincent 2012). This person appeared exasperated in their written comments, stating that these concerns were 'not about exclusion'. They wanted it made clear that it was important to 'distinguish between exclusion, and children leaving mainstream for other reasons'. A similar viewpoint was evident when we wrote: 'It is clear that the most common exclusion processes consist of in-school meetings, at which parents and specialist staff such as psychologists are present: a school-based meeting is usually sufficient in the case of referral to part-time complementary AP'. In this instance, we were told, despite evidence to the contrary that exclusions

always 'follow a set process'. This person was concerned about any implication that there were multiple processes, unless we were 'not just talking about formal exclusion', and if this was the case, we needed to say that was what we meant.

Some of the sociological perspectives we sought to bring to the analysis of exclusion *were* included in the REA. For example, our answer to the question about what schools were doing to prevent exclusions included two major sections, strategies focused on the student and strategies focused on the school. The student focus includes a section on gender-specific programmes, and the school focus had sections on curriculum, structural changes and teacher development. We also noted that 'it would be helpful to understand the relationship better between formal exclusion by schools and "self-exclusion" by students; through truancy and school refusal'. However, such perspectives were side-lined in the executive summary. (As stated earlier, it is the executive summary that is the most commonly read section of a report.) We also note that the executive summary left out concerns about national policy, the wider public policy agenda and wider social processes, all of which, we would argue, contribute to patterns of school exclusions.

Behaviour

In the commissioning of the Investigative research into alternative provisionundefine there was an overriding concern with students' poor behaviour. This was a key representation of the problem of school exclusion. This is very much in line with that of the current Conservative government. In April 2021 as the Covid-19 lockdown was drawing to a close, the former education secretary, Gavin Williamson, announcing the creation of a 10 m GBP 'behaviour hub', suggested that the lockdown would have affected students' behaviour and that as students returned to school that he gave his support to schools 'taking firm action to create a disciplined and calm environment' (Adams 2021; MIddleton 2021). Williams' statement aligns with the governing Conservative Party's manifesto taken to the last election, which stated that:

> **We will back heads and teachers on discipline**. We will expand our programme to help schools with the worst behaviour learn from the best – and **back heads to use exclusions**. (original emphasis, https://www.conserva tives.com/our-plan)

The importance of linking school exclusions to behaviour was made clear to us when a policy officer commented on a phrase in one of our versions of the report that read: 'spanning permanent exclusion (on behavioural grounds) through to complex SEMH needs'. We were told in no uncertain terms that: 'All exclusions are on behaviour grounds'.

Addressing poor behaviour was also seen to require punitive responses. We had sections in the REA that addressed the ways in which programmes in AP could help young people consider the actions that had led up to the school exclusion. Drawing on work conducted in neighbouring nation Scotland, we observed that 'Exclusions are sometimes used as punishment rather than as an opportunity to reflect on what needs to change for/with the pupil and the school (Pupil Inclusion Network Scotland 2012)'. A written comment by a DfE official noted that: 'They are always a disciplinary tool.' In another comment related to the type of education in AP that might help address behaviour, it was stated that: 'I don't think it's the education that (is) intended to improve their behaviour?' This suggests perhaps that the punishment of being excluded and being referred to an AP is in itself sufficient to improve behaviour and that any underlying causes are not worth exploring.

Schools and teachers

The DfE's approach to schools' responsibility was complex. One of the REA questions sought to determine what schools were doing to 'help' those in danger of being excluded. However, whilst the REA identified the primarily pastoral responses that had been employed to retain students in the mainstream, there did not seem to be an active DfE interest in what schools were doing to 'cause'

school exclusion. This was despite the REA chapter identifying school factors that contributed to exclusion, including for example, systemic racism; as indicated earlier this and other sociological issues were not in the executive summary. The final research report did express some concerns that some schools were perhaps referring students to AP inappropriately and that some AP sites did not meet the educational needs of their students. However, the underlying problem representation was clearly about poor behavioural patterns and bad student decisions.

Through serial drafts of the REA, the DfE rejected any suggestion of a systematic misuse of exclusion. For example, literatures were cited that indicated that as schools have become more sensitive to comparative academic standings and have engaged in image management, students who are perceived to be damaging to a school's reputation have been vulnerable to exclusion – often through the process of 'off-rolling'[6] (Gill 2017). We were asked to remove these references. We concluded from this request that justifying exclusions is made much easier when the behaviours of students are attributed to individual decision-making on the part of the student. Systemically, it is also easier to justify these exclusions, or turn a blind eye to them, by attributing unjustified exclusions to individual schools' mishandling of the exclusion process.

When we made a comment in relation to connections between school exclusions and performative audit regimes (Ball 2003, 2018; Loxley 2007), we were told that this was 'controversial' and a 'bit of a jump', especially if sending young people to AP who were disrupting others was about 'the school wanting to let others learn'. The silence on the ways in which these exclusions may be assisting the nation's competitiveness in international testing regimes also works to dismiss this as an issue contributing to the problem.

The REA – part of a problematising policy agenda

Bacchi argues that it is important to understand where and how particular problematisations are produced. The *Investigative research into alternative provision* commission did not occur in a vacuum. It was part of suite of policies examining school exclusion and alternative provision at that time (see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creating-opportunity-for-all-our-vision-for-alternative-provision). Key policy texts included the report *Creating opportunity for all: Our vision for alternative provision* (Department for Education (DfE) 2018) and the *Timpson Review of School Exclusion. Creating opportunity for all (*Department for Education (DfE) 2019) which similarly constructed the problem of school exclusion as one of student (mis)behaviour. While the initial vision appeared disturbed by some mainstream school practices, as demonstrated through the desire to ensure that the 'right' students were referred to AP, it identified AP as having the goal of changing behaviour to enable the student to return to the mainstream. It also seemed to suggest that poor behaviour was inevitable and hence why AP need to become an 'integral part of the education system'. The *Timpson Review* provided some shift in the problematisation by seeking to determine why some groups of students were disproportionately excluded compared with others. This though, while still attributing the blame for some behaviours to individual students, shifts the blame to individual teacher behaviours and headteachers who have not implemented appropriate professional development opportunities for staff.

These texts all contain the same kinds of lacunae. The *Timpson Review* does not mention 'racism' despite being concerned with why some students more than others were likely to be excluded from school. There are two mentions of illegal exclusions, perhaps motivated by addressing earlier concerns raised by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (Gazeley et al. 2013) which urged that the informal 'and at times illegal' practice of taking students off the roll needed to be addressed, and that the government 'should take action to reassure itself that pupil moves are not inappropriate, or illegal'. However, even these minor mentions of illegality do not take into account how some students more than others experience this form of treatment, or that exclusions can be effected through more subtle measures. Nor did more wholistic views of schooling get much attention.

Conclusion: what kind of evidence about e and E?

The paper has analysed our experience of being involved in one part of a wider policy review process, using Bacchi's 'Whats the problem represented to be' (2009) approach. We were commissioned to produce evidence but were regularly asked to remove particular sociological explanations of school little e exclusion – an understanding we brought with us from our Australian positioning and ongoing readings of research, including our own. Engaged for our expertise, we were systematically steered away from producing evidence that exclusion might be to do with both societal and institutional processes. We were firmly directed towards 'behaviour' as the problem for which exclusion was the answer. Despite our continued contestation of the term 'exclusion', the citations in *Investigative research into alternative provision* that addressed the broader social and educational understandings of exclusion were sometimes restricted to the REA and most often treated as being irrelevant to the overall report.

We conclude that although academic evidence was espoused, the reality was a washing out of academic insights from the research project, research which was part of a wider review which consolidated the government's explicitly 'hard line' on behaviour management.

We wonder if our recalcitrance about removing particular references and sentences even reinforced the view of some officers within government that academics (especially sociologists like us who seemingly foregrounded structural oppression over individual responsibility when explaining school exclusions) are 'soft' on behaviour.

But we are not alone in our interpretations of exclusion. For many researchers in the field of education and youth studies, exclusion is 'little' e which goes beyond formal school administrative exclusion practices to the ecology of the whole school. Little e exclusion also goes beyond particular 'badly behaved' young people to encompass students informally excluded from school and those whose exclusion is profoundly tangled in the various intersections of their gender, socioeconomic background, race/ethnicity and physical and intellectual abilities. Addressing little e exclusion is thus imbricated in concerns for reform and moves towards an equitable school ecology. The pre-existing policy focus on behaviour actively removed important aspects of the school ecology from consideration, potentially removing from reform interventions some of the very things that produce the behaviour and big E exclusion in question.

Our story of two Es shows how it is that policy coherence is created across multiple texts, through the use of particular problematisations. These problematisations are derived from government policy more generally, as well as historical trends. In our case, the continued push to present information about big E exclusion not only (re)produced a pre-existing policy position, but actively delimited the kinds of equity-oriented interventions that flowed from it.

Notes

1. GCSE – the qualification normally completed at the end of Year 11.
2. Free School Meals – a midday meal provided free to children whose families are in receipt of welfare payments
3. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, is the school inspection agency in England
4. We focus first of all on the published report. It is important to note that this report had been through several drafts which responded to feedback and questions from a DfE team.
5. SEMH is Special Education and Mental Health
6. Off rolling is the term now used to describe the process where a school illegally removes a student from the roll.

Disclosure statement

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