FORUM

Achieving Zero Permanent Exclusions from School, Social Justice and Economy

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ABSTRACT Zero exclusion schools are possible. More realistically, clusters of schools, with support, coordination and brokering by the local authority (LA) or through local partnerships, can organise and sustain an inclusive educational community. Exclusion from school is a quiet mockery of *Every Child Matters*. Even with the coalition government's abandonment of the requirements for local attendance and behaviour partnerships (due to be in place from September, 2010) and even with the Academies Act in place, it still makes sense in terms of social justice, educational and child support and saving money to reduce exclusions. This article looks at the social justice case through secondary data and reports research and action about how committed local authorities along with their communities can successfully reduce or eliminate permanent exclusions. All political persuasions can sign up to this and prevent harm which is experienced disproportionately by some groups.

The *Strategic Alternatives to Exclusion from School* project set out to explore not whether permanent or fixed period exclusions should be banned but whether they could become unnecessary. Focussing initially on three low excluding LAs and then on five high excluding LAs, this work shows that local authorities have a powerful influence on school exclusion levels. At the local strategic level, provision can be organised for all pupils through collective education and children's services action.

Three factors motivated the *Strategic Alternatives* action project in 2005: a conviction that power and control in education is exercised to an important degree at the corporate level in LAs through elected members and senior officers; the top 15 LA excluders had an average permanent exclusion rate (0.21%) seven times higher than the average for the 15 lowest excluders (national mean 0.11% – 2004/05); low excluders appeared to be able to maintain their low excluder position over time. In the two year project (Parsons, 2009), three of the project LAs reduced fixed period exclusions, including one

which had been the highest permanent excluder in 2003/04. Some secondary schools used newly opened Inclusion Centres or Learning Support Units as substitutes for fixed term exclusion, recognising that the time off school usually meant that pupils, who were not generally on top of their work, would get even further behind. While fixed term exclusions were increasing nationally, three of the LAs were able to reduce their rates.

Reduction in the permanent exclusions in the five high excluding LAs was through the efforts of the LAs, their schools, children's services and some coordinated contribution from the voluntary sector, rather than the project. As well as the provisions mentioned above, managed moves (Abdelnoor, 2008) and alternative curricula played key parts. All had reduced their rates from 2004/05 levels, one achieving a reduction to one quarter of the national rate by 2008/09.

Advances made in reducing exclusions since 1997 by the Labour government should not be discarded lightly by the new administration. However, there are continuing concerns about current legislation and guidance and the operation of procedures at LA and school level. The main concerns are in relation to:

- the paradoxical logic of removing children from education, a state provision seen as important to individual development as well as national economic and social progress;
- the treatment of vulnerable children;
- social justice in terms of the disproportionate exclusions of some groups;
- the apparent tension between *Every Child Matters* and the use of permanent exclusion against a small proportion of children, with fixed period exclusions applied to about 3% of the school population, a proportion of whom receive multiple fixed period exclusions.

This article is divided into a number of sections, mainly reviewing secondary data, in most instances showing data for TWO years to illustrate that inequities are recurrent, systematic and known. The sections which follow are:

- Zero and low excluding local authorities
- Social justice and exclusions
- Strategies for low or zero exclusions

Zero and Low Excluding Local Authorities

Table I shows that there were 17 zero excluding local authorities in 2008/09, up from 12 in 2007/08. Many of these have sustained very low or zero exclusions for two or more years. It can be done. The advantages of managing provision in a non-exclusionary way are massive in terms of reduced conflict and better outcomes at no net cost. The message can be more effectively spread using *evidence* even more than through moral exhortation! Of the LAs achieving zero exclusions in the latest figures, many have sustained this position over two

or more years. 31 out of 150 LAs, 20%, count as low or zero permanent excluders.

	Local Authority	Number of permanent exclusions	Percentage of the school population
	National average	6550	0.09
1	Barnsley	0	0.00
2	Brighton and Hove	x	0.00
3	*City of London*	*0*	*0.00*
4	*Isles of Scilly*	*0*	*0.00*
5	North East Lincolnshire	x	**0.00**
6	North Lincolnshire	0	**0.00**
7	North Tyneside	0	**0.00**
8	Portsmouth	x	0.00
9	Rotherham	x	0.00
10	*Rutland*	*x*	*0.00*
11	Sheffield	x	0.00
12	St. Helens	0	**0.00**
13	Waltham Forest	0	0.00
14	West Berkshire	x	0.00
15	Wigan	x	**0.00**
16	Wolverhampton	0	0.00
17	York	x	**0.00**
18	Leicester	10	**0.01**
19	Cambridgeshire	10	**0.02**
20	Cornwall	10	**0.02**
21	Cumbria	10	0.02
22	Medway	10	**0.02**
23	Slough	10	**0.02**
24	Southend-on-Sea	10	**0.02**
25	Blackpool	10	**0.03**
26	Bolton	10	**0.03**
27	Bradford	30	**0.03**
28	Dorset	20	**0.03**
29	East Riding of Yorkshire	10	**0.03**
30	Kingston upon Thames	10	0.03
31	Stockton-on-Tees	10	**0.03**

Table I. Lowest rates of permanent exclusion 2008/09. x is as given in DfE statistics. The three very small LAs are in *italics*

Table 11 shows that in Wales permanent exclusion rates have been fairly low and often at half the rate for England. Scotland and Northern Ireland have done better, with rates which are less than a quarter of those in England. It is clear

from both the figures and the commentaries on those countries' websites that a different commitment to the care and well-being of all children prevails.

	2006/07	**2007/08**	**2008/09**
Northern Ireland	0.02	0.01	0.01
Scotland	0.04	0.02	0.02
Wales	0.05	0.05	0.05
England	0.12	0.11	0.09

Table II. Percentage rates of permanent exclusion in the countries of the UK.

Social Justice and Exclusions

Exclusion is a disciplinary response from a school and has no forward plan for the child and no coherent vision of the educational community's responsibility for making provision to meet need. It is a punitive response, however regretfully administered. It removes an alleged problem from the school, but it causes great anguish and hardship for the child and family and increases problems for other services to deal with the child following exclusion. There are more effective, efficient and caring ways of managing the challenges at the level of the LA and school clusters with support from other agencies (Parsons, 2009). Camila Batmanghelidjh (2005) and her work with Kids Company demonstrates another, more responsible and caring ethical position.

Some groups are disproportionately excluded. Those from poorer backgrounds as indicated by free school meals, those with special educational needs and some ethnic groups are excluded at up to three times the average rate. Figure 1 shows the rates for permanent exclusions of ethnic minorities for England as a whole. While within the White group Gypsy-Roma and Traveller children are excluded at even higher rates (not shown), the substantially higher than average rates for some ethnic minority groups stubbornly persist year on year. There are arguments to be made about the education system not being adjusted to meet the needs, expectations and attributes of some parts of the citizenry (Parsons et al, 2005).
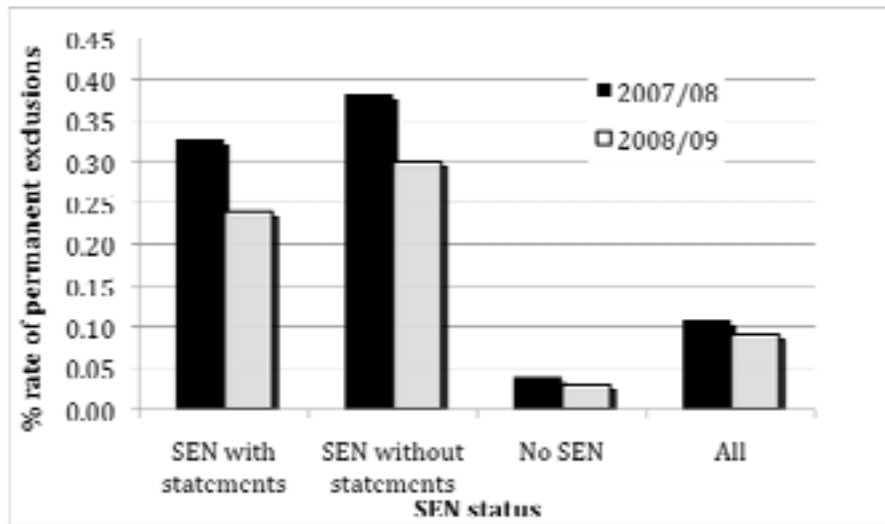
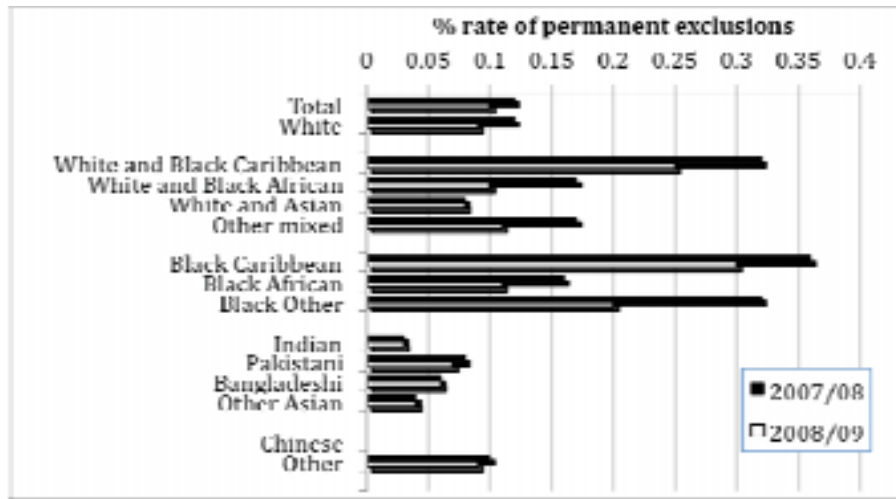Figure 1. Permanent exclusions in England by ethnicity in 2007/08 and 2008/09.

Figure 2. Fixed period exclusions in England by ethnicity in 2007/08 and 2008/09.

There were 6550 permanent exclusions in 2008/09 (down from 8,130 in 2007/08). 5,000 were white, 1,520 were ethnic minorities. Of these, 360 were of 'mixed ethnicity' and 540 were from the three Black groups. The

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disproportionate exclusions nationally of White and Black Caribbean, Black Caribbean and Black Other are plain to see in the graphs.

DfES research on minority ethnic exclusions and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 concluded that 'the disproportionalities, in terms of exclusion and attainment, are institutionally racist outcomes routinely produced as a matter of organisational practice' (Parsons, 2008: 401). Looking at the graphs carefully, it would seem that for permanent exclusions, for those three highest excluded groups shown, the disproportionality is significantly reduced, less pronounced for fixed period exclusions as shown in Figure 2. Maybe there is some movement towards Getting it; Getting it Right (DfES, 2007) but the scale of the difference has been, and remains, disturbing.
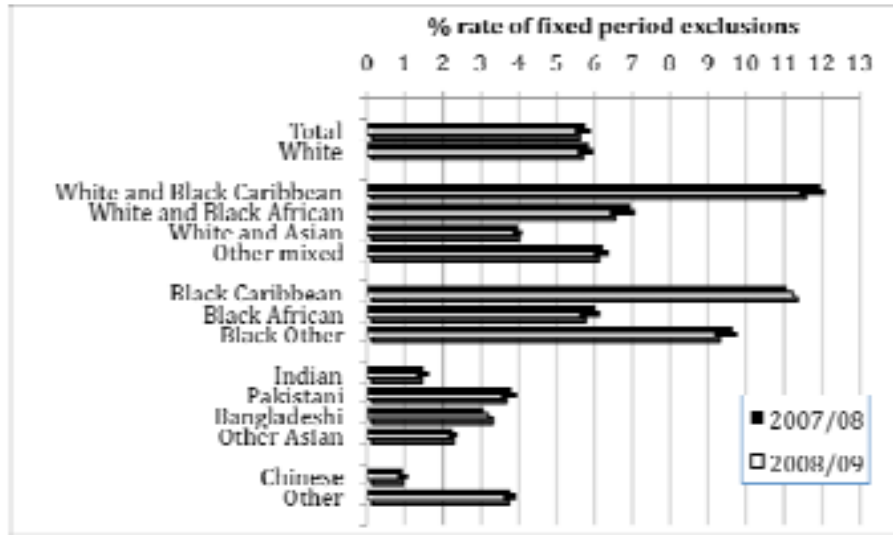

Figure 3: Rates of permanent exclusions in England by SEN status in 2007/08 and 2008/09.

Seventy one percent of permanently excluded children in both years were on the special needs register. As shown in Figure 3, they are two and a half times as likely to be excluded if they have a statement (many of these will be in special schools) and continuing to be three times as likely if on the register of special needs without a statement. This is one of the clearest cases of NOT having an educational system designed to meet need. Some refer to it as scandalous.

Deprivation measures are strongly associated with exclusions. Figure 4 shows that generally exclusion rates decline with affluence. Table III shows that, at the level of individuals, those with a free school meal entitlement are about two and half times as likely to be excluded permanently and a little over twice as likely to be excluded for a fixed period than other pupils.
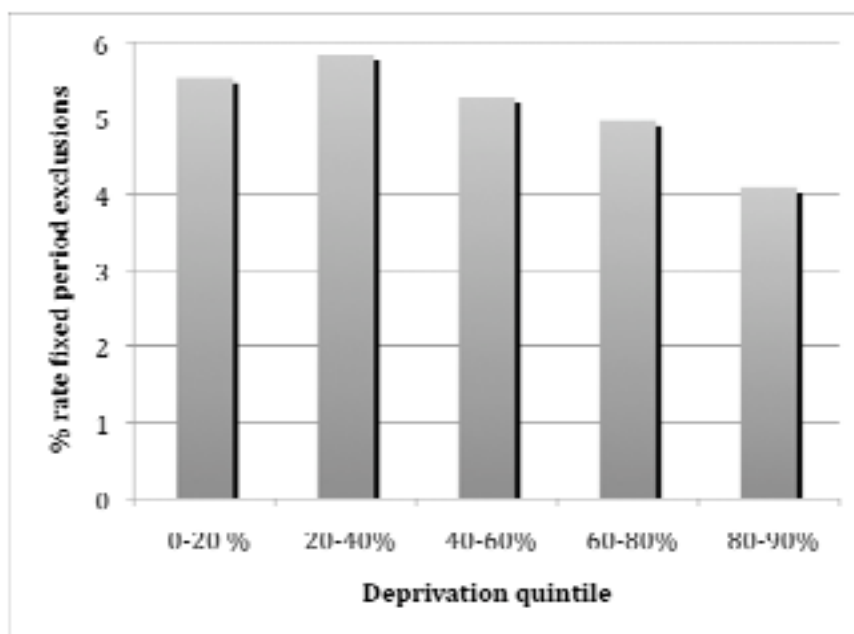
Figure 4. Rates of fixed period exclusions by deprivation quintile of schools' intake 2008/09

Permanent exclusions	Number of exclusions	% of school population	Number of exclusions	% of school population
Pupils eligible for free school meals	3,050	0.28	2,480	0.22
Other pupils	5,020	0.08	3,900	0.06
All pupils	**8,130**	**0.11**	**6,550**	**0.09**
Fixed period Exclusions				
Pupils eligible for free school meals	126,920	11.56	124,190	11.10
Other pupils	255,950	4.02	237,880	3.77
All pupils	**383,830**	**5.14**	**363,280**	**4.89**

Table III. Exclusions by free school meal status.

Strategies for Low or Zero Exclusions

It is important to recognise the pressures which give rise to high rates of exclusion such as:

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- Implicit exclusionary and punitive cultures
- The 'standards' agenda of the DfE and before that the DCSF
- Staff 'training'
- Behaviour that is very risky – knives or drugs
- Delay in getting the multi-agency support
- The myth of eliciting support for the child through exclusion
- Parental non-cooperation
- 'Day 6' provision to be made by the school for a pupil after five days of exclusion
- The one-off incident which could not be predicted
- Distribution of deprivation funding between least and most deprived schools.

It is how an LA, its schools and children and families services work to confront these pressures that is crucial. In low excluding LAs, trust, speedy response and constructive, non punitive layers of provision are robustly coordinated.

Exclusions are applied disproportionately to lower socio-economic groups and some ethnic groups, which raises social justice issues. Poorer children, as signified by free school meals entitlement, and those of Black Caribbean heritage are much more likely to be excluded as white children. Those with special needs are likewise vulnerable to exclusions. The outcomes for permanently excluded young people are generally poor and it is the plain, avoidable absence from education that is the root cause.

There is a key strategic role for the LA or partnership in reducing exclusions. The LA retains a political, financial and moral power amongst the providers of services for children, including education. The key strategic developments are:

1. Shared commitment across schools and LA members and officers working with *explicit principles and procedures*
2. *Broadening the school* by making more diverse and multi-level provision in schools
3. *Building bridges* so that managed moves can be organised and school clusters can share the responsibilities
4. Alternative provision involves *finding or making a place for every child*
5. *Joining up the dots* to make multiagency work effective
6. Ethos, attitudes and *sharing a vision*, working at hearts and minds to gain support for including all children and responding to all needs.

A strategic inclusion agenda shown to work includes action of the following kind:

1. Identify the credible inclusion champion at LA member level
2. Negotiate speedily authority level changes in structures, provision and staffing that headteachers will accept

3. Ensure the lead is taken by a high ranking and well-paid officer who has the authority and respect of heads and can do business with them

4. Support school leaders in diversifying their provision and making best use of the diversified workforce in supporting challenging young people and their families

5. Establish agreement amongst schools about how pupils might be moved from their current school, either permanently or temporarily, building on personal relations between schools but creating fair access protocols or points systems

6. Develop a range of alternative curriculum providers, assessing and monitoring that providers can meet targets and contribute valuably to children's development including qualifications

7. Ensure that the teams of other professionals are of appropriate skill levels and can offer a fast response

8. Create and recreate the sense of belief in the LA's duty to provide calmly and restoratively for every child.

Zero exclusion schools and LAs work. Personal and collective damage to individuals and families is reduced, some shocking, persistent inequalities are reduced and some woeful lack of care for special needs pupils and those growing up in deprived circumstances is avoided. All this can be done in a way which is 'cost neutral' and does not damage attainment standards. No other country in Europe does it as we do it in England and that should also be a prompt to new thinking, new practice and real demonstration of every child matters, whichever government is in power.

Acknowledgement

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