

'They have just given up on me' How pupils labelled with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experience the process of exclusion from school

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For decades, the school exclusion rates have been a cause for concern within the English education system. We have witnessed a steady increase in the numbers of pupils being excluded since 2012. Evidence suggests that some children are more likely to be excluded from school, a significant number will have had the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties label attached to them. This article will draw on the work of Parsons and Howlett (Permanent exclusions from school: A case where society is failing its children. *Support for Learning*, 11, 3, 109–112, 1996) to see how much, if any, progress has been made since the publication of their work which raised concerns regarding the exclusion processes employed in England. Drawing on the perspectives of pupils, parents and teachers, 13 in-depth case studies were developed, with emphasis placed on employing innovative and creative methods to hear the voices of young people. The findings revealed that young people, their parents and teachers feel the current education system continues to fail this group of young people.

[Corrections made on 5 March 2021, after first online publication: some of the quotes in the 'Findings' section were initially omitted due to a production error and have been reinstated in this version.]

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Introduction

In Parsons and Howlett's (1996) work on exclusion they raised concerns over the significant number of young people who were being failed by society, due to techniques employed in schools to remove particular groups of students. Despite being published over 25 years ago very little appears to have changed, as literature intimates that our education system continues to blame and punish young people who do not conform by removing them from the classroom (Caslin, 2014; McCluskey, 2014; Holt, 2016). This is particularly the case for those who have received the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) label, they are at a higher risk of being excluded as they continue to be framed as being a 'culprit' rather than a 'victim' (Parsons and Howlett, 1996).

The labels that have been attached to this group of young people are in a constant state of flux and have included; maladjusted, Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), SEBD and most recently Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) (Stanforth and Rose, 2018; Caslin, 2019). For the purposes of this article the term SEBD will be employed as a reflection of the language that is used within the classroom as part of the special educational needs discourse (Penketh, 2014; Caslin, 2019). This is also to acknowledge the consistent emphasis that is placed on the behaviour aspect of such labels (Norwich and Eaton, 2015).

This article seeks to build on the work undertaken by Parsons and Howlett (1996) and advocates the need to explore these issues from a disability studies perspective. This calls us to move away from an individualistic understanding of children's behaviour and therefore, a medical model approach, to instead, employ a social model approach to explore the role of society and in particular how the education system is constructed (Holt, 2016; Caslin, 2017; Goodley, 2017). Indeed, the impact of social factors on the behaviours that are displayed in the classroom is now widely acknowledged (Timimi, 2010; Holt, 2016; Caslin, 2019). Here, disability becomes a process, these young people are disabled by the way they are responded to within the education system that has been socially constructed.

Due to the behaviours displayed in the classroom not conforming to educators' expectations of how young people should behave, they continue to be placed on the outskirts of mainstream education (Caslin, 2014; Holt, 2016; Goodley, 2017).

There are concerns regarding how labels are employed within schools as these can work to reinforce the medical model (Goodley, 2017; Caslin, 2019). The stigmas that are attached to these labels will shape the perceptions of young people held by the adults who surround them. Research which has explored teacher perspectives, indicates that educators often believe poor behaviour in the classroom to be the result of deficits within the child (Armstrong, 2018). Yet, there is also research which suggests 'difficult' behaviour presented in the classroom can be the result of young people's educational needs not being met (Parsons and Howlett, 1996; Armstrong, 2018; Caslin, 2019).

Children receive labels for their perceived inappropriate behaviour based on educator's subjective expectations of how children should behave in a classroom (Timimi, 2010, Holt, 2016). There is evidence to suggest that some teachers are more tolerant than others and how teachers respond can also have an influence on the relationships that are developed (Orsati and Causton-Theoharis, 2013; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016). Research that has explored teacher perceptions of this group of pupils suggests that although they generally endorse the principles of inclusion they express concern about those who have had the SEBD label attached to them (Goodman and Burton, 2010; Hodkinson, 2019). Although we have had the rhetoric of inclusion for many years some teachers still do not feel prepared to work with a diverse range of learners (Penketh and Waite, 2017; Hodkinson, 2019). Unfortunately, we appear to be becoming less tolerant of such differences as children's behaviour is medicalised, constrained, amended and ultimately punished for being different (Timimi, 2010; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016; Goodley, 2017).

Through the adoption of a utilitarian approach to education, we are able to justify the removal of young people who have received the SEBD label from the classroom. Resulting in hundreds of young people missing out on their right to an education (Oxley, 2015). Indeed, the most recent data from the Department for Education indicate that exclusion rates have been steadily increasing since 2012 (DfE, 2019a). The increase in official exclusion rates is concerning, however, there is a need to be cautious when examining such data as it potentially does not capture all the young people who are being removed from the classroom. As schools become under increasing pressure to reduce the number of permanent exclusions, they will turn to alternative forms of removing problematic young

people. Power and Taylor (2018) highlight the need to broaden our definition of school exclusion and take into consideration the widespread use of other forms of exclusion – variously termed ‘illegal’, ‘unofficial’ or ‘informal’. We are also witnessing an increase in exclusion taking place within the school, with the employment of techniques such as isolation and seclusion rooms. Although technically the young person is still in the building they are removed from the classroom and their peers. There have been concerns raised regarding these approaches, specifically the lack of educational opportunities afforded to young people. It is argued the highly punitive nature of these actions violates children’s rights (Barker *et al.*, 2010). Families will often not challenge these exclusions because they may not understand how to question school authority (Broomhead, 2013; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016). This leaves parents and their children in an extremely vulnerable situation where they are dependent on educational professionals.

Those working within the education system will be constrained by the government agenda of the day. The current Conservative government have prioritised the reinvigoration of traditionalism and a ‘high stakes’ testing regime which leads to the disengagement of students who struggle academically and requires greater levels of conformity to school rules (Power and Taylor, 2018). Recent policies, such as ‘Behaviour and discipline in schools: advice for headteachers and school staff’ (DfE, 2016), have led to an increasing emphasis being placed on school autonomy. Each school is required to set out its own individual behaviour management policy which has led to disparity and a postcode lottery of support for young people. Some schools are more effective at supporting pupils to succeed in a mainstream environment. Educators are required to put the needs of the majority first resulting in the more challenging pupil being removed from the class, ignored by the teacher and subsequently excluded from the school. We do, however, need to consider the position of the teacher here. Policy initiatives are focused on empowering teachers and increasing their ability to remove ‘unwanted’ pupils rather than empowering educators to effectively support this group of pupils (Caslin, 2019). Evidently, recent emphasis on measurement of performance as a central preoccupation in schools (Goodley, 2017; Deakin *et al.*, 2018) has had a damaging impact on the educational journey of young people who have received the SEBD label.

Numerous studies have highlighted that exclusions are not an effective way to change behaviour (McCluskey, 2014; Oxley, 2015; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016). A key reason for this being, it does not address the underlying issues but instead focuses on the individual which inevitably leads to feelings of rejection and

resentment (Oxley, 2015). The literature intimates, the outcomes for young people who are excluded from education can be extremely damaging (McCluskey *et al.*, 2016). In the long term, those who are excluded from school tend to have poor academic outcomes which result in lower status occupations, less stable career patterns, greater unemployment and are more likely to go to prison in comparison with their peers (The Taylor Report, 2012; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016; Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019). This article seeks to gain an insight into the perceived impact of being removed from the classroom from the perspective of the pupil and the adults who surround them.

Research approach

There has been an increased acknowledgement of the value of hearing the voices of young people to gain an insight into how they experience the world around them (McCluskey, 2014; Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015; Kennedy, 2015). The importance of listening to the voices of young people is also reflected in government legislation with the most recent SEN Code of Practice (2014), stating that young people should be involved in all decision-making processes that affect them. However, whether this has ever been truly achieved is questionable with research suggesting that the extent to which voices are heard can be dependent on the adult's willingness to listen (McCluskey, 2014; Palikara *et al.*, 2018). This article aims to explore the position of young people within the confines of an education system which seeks to remove them. In order to achieve this, 13 case studies were developed to track individual educational journeys. The case studies consisted of 13 pupils. 10 of their teachers and 10 of their parents were also interviewed. The researcher worked closely with the education providers to identify participants. The young people were selected on the basis that they were aged between 14 and 16 years old and had been excluded from school for their behaviour. Young people who met this criteria were then invited to meet with the researcher to discuss their participation. From the outset of the study considerable time was spent developing relationships with the young people, education providers and parents to ensure they understood the nature and purpose of the research. For the purposes of this article, although emphasis will be placed on the voice of the young person, it was also considered important to gain an insight into how the adults surrounding them experience these processes.

Due to the chaotic nature of the young people's educational trajectories (McCluskey *et al.*, 2016), the research took place in three different educational

settings, all outside of mainstream education, located in the North-West of England. The provisions included a special school for young people labelled as having SEBD, an alternative training provision and a support centre for children who have been excluded from mainstream education. The research focused on young people who will have had significant experience of the schooling system and were likely to have attended a wide range of educational provisions.

Throughout the study ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. In a study of this nature issues around power relations were significant. In order to address this, prior to any data collection taking place, the researcher spent time getting to know the individual participants to establish trust. The data collection techniques developed were discussed with the young people, here, flexibility was essential to allow young people to decide how they wanted to participate (Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015). It was considered important that the participants felt part of and in some ways took ownership of the research process. One mechanism employed to achieve this was to ask the pupils to pick pseudonyms that would be employed throughout the research. Within the findings section of this article all the names used are those chosen by the young people themselves. In addition, the study adopted 'process consent' with consent being negotiated as an on-going concern throughout the research process (Heath *et al.*, 2004). The young people were provided with on-going opportunities to agree to continue or withdraw at any stage (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017).

There were two main stages to the research. During the first stage, the researcher met with the young people in groups to work on a variety of activities to enable an exploration of their views. They included graffiti walls and storytelling, which were based on O'Kane's (2008) work on activity days. Themes discussed during the sessions included the process of exclusion, relationships with teachers, the SEBD label and notions of pupil voice.

For the second stage of the research a series of individual interviews were conducted with each of the young people, their parents and teachers. The aim of this being to gain a more detailed insight into the educational journeys experienced by young people. During the interviews the young people were asked to fill in a timeline of their educational journeys (see Figure 1). The educational life grid designed for the purpose of this study was initially employed during a pilot study for the research and proved successful see O'Connor *et al.* (2011). This method is based on life grids which are a visual tool for mapping important life events against the course of time (Wilson *et al.*, 2007). Rather than focusing on

PRIMARY SCHOOL

OUTSIDE								
TEACHER								
SCHOOL								



								
								
	NURSERY	RECEPTION	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	YEAR THREE	YEAR FOUR	YEAR FIVE	YEAR SIX

Figure 1. Example of educational life grid template [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

particular dates the educational life grids were split into three different phases of their education – primary, secondary and future. Throughout the interviews the young people were asked to identify what they consider to be ‘critical moments’ in their education, for example, when they were excluded from school. Thomson *et al.* (2002, p. 339) define ‘critical moments’ as ‘an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities’. The tool developed for this research acted as a useful prompt and allowed young people the opportunity to reflect on their educational journey.

It was during the second stage of the research that interviews took place with the adults that surround the young person – their parents and teachers to gain a more holistic insight into the educational journeys experienced by young people.

Findings

The study aimed to place the young person at the heart of the research. To ensure their voices were heard, a constructivist grounded theory approach was

employed. This enables the researcher to develop a flexible and yet, systematic approach to analysing their data (Charmaz, 2014). The data collected was initially analysed by the researcher to develop the key themes using the processes of coding and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher then met with the young people to discuss the themes and to ensure their voices were captured accurately. After careful consideration and discussions with the young people a series of key themes were identified. These are discussed below:

The young people felt they were viewed as a ‘culprit rather than a victim’

The young people who participated in the study felt that the labels that had been attached to them would shape how they were perceived by their teachers. This group of young people continue to be framed as ‘the problem rather than having problems’ (Parsons and Howlett, 1996; Heary and Hennessy, 2005). During one of the activity sessions, we explored the relationship between pupils and teachers and when asked if an incident occurred regarding a pupil’s perceived inappropriate behaviour whether they felt the pupil’s voice would be heard, they had the following responses;

No because nobody would believe us in a special school (Martin)

The teacher all the time ... because they think kids are just going to lie (Whitney-Bob)

From the discussions with the young people it became clear that the way in which the teachers responded would impact upon the relationships that were developed (Orsati and Causton-Theoharis, 2013; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016). This led to feelings of mistrust between the pupil and the teacher

They would never believe me. They would always think that I must be a bad kid. (Tyrese)

Previous research has indicated that ‘difficult’ behaviour presented in the classroom could be in response to the pupil’s educational needs not being met (Armstrong, 2018; Caslin, 2019). However, a number of the teachers in their descriptions of their understanding of the SEBD label appeared to reinforce the medical model. This is reflected in the language employed which suggests that the perceived deficits within the child would lead them to display behaviour in the classroom which does not conform to teachers’ expectations (Timimi, 2010;

Goodley, 2017). For example, one teacher implied it was the pupil who has to blame for not fitting in with what is deemed acceptable;

They are constantly challenging routines or structures which are put in place to help them cope with the school day and their behaviour doesn't quite fit with what is acceptable. (Support centre teacher)

The parents who participated in the study also raised concerns regarding the impact of their child receiving the SEBD label. Some of the parents felt that the school would seek to blame and punish the pupil by removing them rather than explore ways to support their child to remain in mainstream education (Holt, 2016; Caslin, 2019).

When he was in mainstream all he would get was he was being naughty again. He is out of class for a week as soon as that week was up he would be in bother again. (Daniel's mum)

It was suggested that the SEBD label would be employed as a mechanism to remove unwanted pupils from the classroom (Caslin, 2014; Holt, 2016). However, for those working within educational provisions there were concerns raised that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to support this group of young people;

I think a lot of educators aren't too sure on it whereas it is easy to label them to be honest with you as SEBD and push them to one side over here rather than cope with the problems. (Support centre teacher)

The suggestion here is that pupils are being removed from mainstream provision due to teachers lacking the training and confidence to support a diverse range of learners (Goodman and Burton, 2010; Hodkinson, 2019). With increasing emphasis placed on empowering teachers they may feel justified in taking the approach of exclusion.

Justifying the removal of young people

Young people who have had the SEBD label attached to them are the most likely group of pupils to be excluded from the classroom (DfE, 2019a). Table 1 illustrates the chaotic nature of the young person's educational journey once they have been removed from the mainstream environment.

The number of times that pupils had been excluded highlights the difficulties in re-integrating young people back into mainstream education. This also demonstrates

Table 1. Overview of the research participant's educational journeys

<i>Name</i>	<i>Type of provision</i>	<i>Number of provisions attended</i>	<i>Number of times excluded</i>
Adam	Support Centre (A)	8	2
Christine	Support Centre (A)	10	Not known
Clare	Support Centre (A)	7	4
Zoe	Alternative provision (B)	4	0
Helen	Alternative provision (B)	6	Not known
Whitney-Bob	Alternative provision (B)	11	Not known
Louise	Alternative provision (B)	10	2
Martin	Special School (C)	5	2
Billy	Special School (C)	6	Not known
Tyrese	Special School (C)	4	1
Jacob	Special School (C)	6	2
Boris	Special School (C)	6	3
Daniel	Special School (C)	7	4

the ineffectiveness of exclusion as quite often what this leads to is young people being placed in a wide variety of different educational provisions. This is captured by Clare below;

I have been kicked out four times of four different schools ... they said if you get kicked out of this one I don't think we would be able to get you in to another school or another opportunity to go to another school. The only opportunity would be a college all week which I went well that would be OK but I still want to go to school. (Clare)

The participants in this study agreed that schools will adopt a utilitarian approach to 'deal with the problem pupil'. This was seen to be as a result of the preoccupation in schools with attainment and standards which leaves little room for young people who do not conform or offer any financial reward (Goodley, 2017; Deakin *et al.*, 2018). This is summarised in the following quote;

I can understand why with the pressures of league tables and other pressures that are heaped on schools in terms of attainment and progress Ofsted and so on. I can understand why kids do slip through the net and end in a school like ours. (Special school headteacher)

Mainstream isn't for everybody as I say schools are mainly focused on exams and results and there isn't the support in mainstreams yet. Some schools are very good from my knowledge from walking round seeing kids from different schools, some schools are very good and some schools aren't so good. There is not a level playing field. (Support centre teacher)

Teachers suggested that mainstream schools would need to change their whole ethos and approach to successfully engage those labelled with SEBD in order for an inclusive model to work. The teachers also acknowledged that there is currently not a level playing field with some schools being more tolerant in their approach to challenging pupils;

There is no point in excluding somebody for telling you to fuck off you would be excluding 30 people a day. In a mainstream school that is a major problem if you told one of the senior teachers to fuck off we can't have that you will have to go home. (Special school teacher 3)

Research indicates that young people will display inappropriate behaviour as a means to demonstrate their feelings of disaffection and disengagement (Parsons and Howlett, 1996; Armstrong, 2018). With increasing emphasis being placed on conformity and school autonomy the participants indicated that this would have a detrimental impact on how young people feel they are perceived. The stigma that is attached to the SEBD label shapes not only how adults perceive them, but also how they come to perceive themselves (Caslin, 2019). Through the process of exclusion young people became aware of their position and felt they were simply not wanted within mainstream environments

Some schools just take it over the top, you have a little fight and get kicked out for nothing ... say if you go to a school and you think it is good and you have a fight some schools will kick you out and you have got that reputation haven't you. (Adam)

Once a child has been excluded from school this will have a detrimental impact on their educational journey and how they come to see themselves. Visser

et al. (2005) argues that the characteristics of disaffection, lack of progression and dispossession are frequently found in young people who have ‘achieved’ the SEBD label. These young people are also more likely to go missing in a competitive education system because they offer little in terms of academic achievement (Goodley, 2017; Caslin, 2019). The concerns raised by previous researchers (Parsons and Howlett, 1996; Oxley, 2015; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016) that exclusion only works to punish the individual which leads to feelings of rejection and resentment are reflected in the responses from those who participated in the study.

Both pupils and parents felt they were being rejected by the education system

Parents were able to articulate the struggles they encountered in trying to find their child a suitable educational provision. This is further highlighted by Broomhead’s (2013) work on the stigma experienced by parents whose children have received the SEBD label. Parents indicated that they felt frustrated and let down by educational professionals;

They didn’t want him in a mainstream school because there were no placements in mainstream school. Basically that is a load of shit what they are saying is they haven’t got the money, well they have but they don’t want to spend it on him. That was his last choice that school there and if I didn’t agree I was getting taken to court but no-one was getting taken to court for him being out of school for a year ... no mother should have to endure what I have endured. (Boris’ mum)

This suggests that the system not only works to punish the pupils, but also their parents (Parsons and Howlett, 1996). Rather than feeling supported the parents felt they were put in a position of blame (Broomhead, 2013). Parsons and Howlett (1996) emphasised the need for not only schools, but also wider organisations to work with parents to help them ensure their child has access to education. There have been attempts to empower both parents and pupils to navigate the exclusion process such as the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) which makes clear that both parents and young people should be part of all decision making processes, unfortunately neither the pupils nor parents who took part in the study felt informed or included in decisions that were being made

I don’t really know because at the time when I got told that I was not going to that school anymore I was going to (special school) I went why? They

wouldn't really tell me, just went I am moving but I didn't really understand exclusion and all that then (Billy)

This does then leave young people and their parents in a vulnerable position as they do not feel able to challenge such decisions (Broomhead, 2013; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016). For the majority of young people and their parents, they pursued remaining in mainstream education but struggled to navigate the exclusion processes and ensure their voices were heard;

My aunty and my mum tried dead hard to get me back into schools but they wouldn't accept me. It took quite a few weeks to get into the school I am meant to be in now. I was just like sitting at home not really doing nothing (Zoe)

My fight was how can you tell me that a child has got behavioural problems ADHD and you are passing him from pillar to post. I couldn't cope with that as a grown up how do you expect a seven year old little boy to cope with it. (Boris' mum)

Parsons and Howlett (1996) highlighted that the exclusionary mechanisms that are employed in schools were leading to young people missing out on their right to education. These concerns have been raised by more recent studies such as Oxley (2015) and the Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019). This is further exacerbated by schools employing illegal mechanisms to remove unwanted pupils Power and Taylor (2018). The young people wanted to remain in mainstream education and described their frustrations at missing out on school;

I was literally suspended to a date but they just kept on adding suspension dates on. I was saying this is unacceptable I am missing out on school (Daniel)

The concerns raised by parents and pupils about not feeling worthy to be in mainstream school were reinforced by some of the teachers who in their responses suggested that there are some young people who will never be able to succeed in a mainstream school

For some children school is not the answer and there are some young people that we are working with, and school will never meet their needs because they can't function in a big anonymous organisation. Sometimes the staff don't have the time because they are driven towards targets. I think you are on a hiding to nothing because the two sides can't meet in the middle. (Alternative provision staff member)

The continued emphasis placed on blaming the child and their parent is having a significant impact on young people's educational journeys and the opportunities that are afforded to them. There is a need to reconsider how we respond to pupil's behaviour and move beyond the individual to consider the impact of wider social structures such as the education system (Timimi, 2010; Holt, 2016; Goodley, 2017).

Discussion

This article aimed to explore how far we have come in our response to young people who are excluded from school since the publication of Parsons and Howlett's work in 1996. Although based on a relatively small sample the article provides a snapshot into the experiences of young people who have been excluded and the adults who surround them. Furthermore, it was not the intention of the study to produce generalisations; instead, focus was placed on providing an account of the specific situation that gets 'sufficiently close to its underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations' (Winter, 2000, p. 1). This article then hopes to afford those who work closely with this group of pupils an opportunity to gain an insight into how they experience the exclusionary processes that are employed within the English education system.

The findings revealed that many of the concerns raised by Parsons and Howlett (1996) still remain a feature of the current education system. Young people will be defined by the labels that have been attached to them; this will then inform how they are responded to in the classroom (Caslin, 2019). Both pupils and parents felt that they would be placed in a position of blame and that the education system worked to punish rather than support them. This results in young people missing out on their right to education.

Once excluded the young people faced difficulties in trying to find a suitable educational placement. The removal of this group of pupils was seen to be justified as they do not conform to the expectations of how young people should behave within an educational setting. Teachers acknowledged their position and recognised that mainstream schools' preoccupation with standards and results leaves little room to effectively support this group of pupils (Goodley, 2017; Deakin *et al.*, 2018). The findings suggest that exclusion is not an effective way of dealing with young people who have achieved SEBD status. Indeed, the process of exclusion was seen to have a detrimental impact on their educational

journeys. Following their exclusion, the pupils would encounter a wide range of educational provisions and none of the pupils were able to successfully reintegrate back into mainstream education. The study has also highlighted the illegal mechanisms that are being employed to remove this group of pupils and the impact being excluded has on a young person's identity (Power and Taylor, 2018; Caslin, 2019).

The recent Timpson Review of School Exclusion (DfE, 2019b) acknowledges that the exclusion processes that are currently employed within the English education system are extremely damaging. Although the government response has been to agree to meet the recommendations 'in principal' (DfE, 2019c) only time will tell what the impact of this report will be. If we do not address these issues and ensure educational professionals and parents feel enabled to effectively support young people who have received the SEBD label to remain in the classroom, as a society, we will simply continue to fail this group of pupils.

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