

School Exclusion Risks after COVID-19



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Summary

This report looks at potential new and heightened risks for school exclusions caused by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Exclusions have risen sharply in England in the last few years. Over-represented groups include children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), from particular ethnic backgrounds and those living in areas of high deprivation. We know the impact of Covid-19 on schools is substantial for practitioners and students. The social and emotional disruption caused by the pandemic and the subsequent school closures is highly likely to have increased or exacerbated student anxiety and other mental health issues. There is also a concern with school connectedness for vulnerable students whose patterns of school attendance have been disrupted. These concerns raise issues around transitions back to school settings.

Members of the Excluded Lives Research Team¹ talked to practitioners, policy makers and professionals in different parts of England to glean an understanding of their perceptions of the situation, how at-risk students might be identified and what return to school support and guidance exists or can be developed to support practitioners (including implications for integrated, cross-professional working) as well as children and families. What rapidly became evident were the associated policy implications that emerged alongside implications for practice. We spoke to 70 people from 26 Local Authorities over 16 virtual sessions and individual meetings, and received an additional four written responses. This report draws on views from health (public health, mental health, school nurses, and hospital schools); education (primary, secondary, alternative provision and special schools, LA maintained schools and Academy Trusts, teacher training institutions, and virtual schools), criminal justice (police, lawyers, and restorative justice); Local Authority teams (working in exclusion, inclusion, behaviour and attendance, SENDIASS, parent support, school engagement, and fostering networks) and third sector voluntary organisations. We asked the following three questions:

1. What are the heightened risks for exclusion as schools restart? Which students are at risk?
2. How can we mitigate these risks? Who needs to act, when and how?
3. What is happening to currently excluded students including where there is no alternative provision?

Overall themes

A number of reoccurring themes emerged from our discussions that have broader implications for the formulation of policy and practice. These included:

- (Re)integration and re-engagement
- Access to learning
- Importance of communication
- Implications of policy and legislation changes (behaviour, SEND, and school exclusion)
- The need for multi-agency working and contextual safeguarding
- Preparing the school community
- Flexibility and new ways of working

¹ Excluded Lives website: <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/excluded-lives/>

The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences (ESRC 1811EP001/LH7: Principal investigators, Associate Professor Ian Thompson and Professor Harry Daniels)

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Heightened risks and ways forward

'The doubly excluded'

Tom was permanently excluded from school before the COVID-19 lockdown. Though he is clearly vulnerable, he does not have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), nor is he known to children's social care, and his parents are not key workers. This means that Tom has not had access to any interim provision in the local Pupil Referral Unit during the lockdown, and he has not yet been placed at a new school.

All over the country, Local Authorities, schools, and voluntary sector organisations are working hard to ensure that students like Tom, who were permanently excluded prior to school closures, do not slip through the net and become further marginalised from the education system during the pandemic. There is a risk that without an alternative provision or school place, these young people will completely disengage. We heard examples of schools being encouraged to rescind recent permanent exclusions and opt instead for a Managed Move with no return. In these cases, the students are dual registered at the excluding and receiving schools, and the excluding school continues to provide both work and safeguarding checks until the student is able to take up their new school place. Other Local Authorities had extended their Day Six provision, in the form of online tutoring, to students who had been permanently excluded, or who were at risk of exclusion, for the duration of the lockdown. Concern was also raised around children and young people moving to new areas during the pandemic, and ensuring that they are placed on a school roll. Discussants mentioned Fair Access Panels as one way to ensure that no child becomes missing from education. The key message from all practitioners was the need to build strong **(re)integration** packages and plans around students who have been permanently excluded, are starting a Managed Move, or moving into a different Local Authority/school to help them to successfully transition into their new setting when schools reopen. This will involve practitioners from the school the student has left, the receiving school, alternative provision and external agencies working together with children, young people and their families.

'The happier at home'

Ellie has had five foster placements and attended four different schools over the last three years. The school closures have given her the stability she has lacked. She has had time to get to know her foster carers who have both been at home throughout and have helped her with her home learning. She has not felt the pressure to meet up with old acquaintances who want to do the things she has been in trouble for in the past. She feels secure, safe and less anxious.

David has autism and has been unhappy in his secondary school where he has felt friendless and bullied. He feels happiest when on his computer and he has thrived on online learning. He enjoys the routine and not feeling different. He is never embarrassed online and he can interact with his teachers in ways that he can control.

Both Ellie and David have enjoyed being in a safe and secure environment and their learning has been enhanced. They dread going back to school.

There was a widespread concern about children like Ellie and David self-excluding, and becoming 'non-returners'. In some cases, families have adapted to a different lifestyle during lockdown, and are supportive of their child's decision not to return. We heard that some parents/carers who themselves have become anxious are reassured by the presence of their children in the home, and other parents/carers are scared to send their children into school due to fears of contracting the virus (particularly where there are underlying health conditions). While Ellie and David are both thriving at home, we also heard that some young people were 'retreating to their bedrooms'. Focus must be placed on helping these young people to **re-engage** with school. Deploying home-school link workers will play a vital role in this process.

'Coming out of left field'

Hazel has always enjoyed school, but during the lockdown she has felt isolated from her friends and disconnected from her school community. Hazel is currently in Year 10 and fears that she will not be able to achieve the grades she was hoping to in her GCSEs due to the time she has lost from school and 'curriculum gaps'. This is weighing heavily on Hazel's mind and she has become increasingly frustrated, and started to feel depressed.

As well as heightening the risk for children and young people who were already struggling with aspects of schooling, some of those we spoke to were also worried about the unexpected cases, or the children and young people who 'come out of left field'. These may be young people who like Hazel have felt isolated from their peer and support networks, who feel pressure to perform in upcoming exams and are stressed about their future. Then there are those young people who are grieving due to the death of loved ones and are dealing with bereavement alongside other pressures they may have experienced.

'The learning lottery'

Jason and his sister Shereen attend two different schools. Shereen has had little contact from her school since the lockdown. She receives a weekly workbook through the post, but, since no one looks at her work, after the first week she stopped completing it. She spends her time in her bedroom on TikTok. Although she hasn't yet posted anything she enjoys watching others.

Jason's school, however, has been proactive. They have offered him a laptop and a dongle that enables him to access two hours a day online learning. He sees the teacher and other children and keeps in touch. This also gives his day a routine. More recently, the school have assigned him a teaching assistant because of his learning disability. She phones him regularly to see how he is managing the work and whether he needs additional support.

Overall, the communication strategy adopted by Jason's school will enable him to transition back more easily than Shereen whose withdrawal from the social world gives rise to new but invisible needs.

The variability in what schools have been able to offer in terms of online learning, alongside the digital divide, has meant that not all children and young people have been receiving the same quality, or quantity, of education. The lack of differentiation and personalisation of instruction available to many young people with SEND, including language difficulties, in their online lessons and home education has acted as a barrier to learning. Even in cases where schools had initially provided high quality work and digital or printed materials, parents/carers of children with SEND often felt that it would not be possible for them to maintain the level of learning and specialist teaching their child required for a prolonged period. The above scenarios will have exacerbated disadvantage.

'The re-engaged'

Jaydon finds learning in large classes difficult and often acts the 'class clown' as a way of masking his difficulties. Prior to the lockdown he was at risk of permanent exclusion due to persistent disruptive behaviour. However, during the lockdown, Jaydon as one of only a handful of students in school has enjoyed the small group working and the one-to-one support he has received. His behaviour and relationships with his teachers have improved, and he has a much more positive view of education. He does not want school to return to normal.

While **access to learning** for some has been hampered by COVID-19, for other students, like Jaydon, the type of education and support they have received in school during the pandemic has better suited their needs. Overall, the above vignettes have indicated that schools must take a flexible, staged, and blended approach to learning and teaching as they begin to reopen in order to respond to diverse and fluctuating needs, encourage and maintain engagement, and instigate schooling for all². Curricula should be designed and adapted to meet the academic and the social and emotional needs of all students³.

The above vignettes also draw attention to the **importance of communication**. A re-occurring theme in the conversations we had was the breakdown of communication with diverse communities and concerns about not hearing the voice of young people and their parents. Schools should be planning and implementing communication that builds strong social networks internally and with their community, recognising that written forms of contact may not be accessible or impactful and that phone and video calls might be a more suitable mode of communication. It was seen as helpful to have extended and regular discussions with vulnerable groups about leaving school (primary and secondary) and contending with changes in buildings, staff, and expectations. Working with children and young people could involve engaging with groups, such as Schools Councils and the NHS Youth Forum, as well as individual conversations. Sharing this feedback and knowledge between services was suggested to foster understanding and effective responses to children and young people's concerns, needs, and fears. Some teachers also mentioned how they would be extending the phone calls to students who have not been identified as vulnerable, in the hope of catching and reassuring young people like Hazel, and re-establishing connections.

2 Oxfordshire Hospital School – From Covid-19 back to the classroom: A toolkit for meeting the emotional challenge: <https://ohs.oxon.sch.uk/from-covid-19-back-to-the-classroom>

3 E.g. Planning guide for primary schools: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider-opening-of-schools-from-1-june/planning-guide-for-primary-schools>

Guidance for secondary school provision: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider-opening-of-schools-from-1-june/planning-guide-for-secondary-schools#flexibility>

Oxfordshire County Council guidance on returning to school after lockdown: <http://schools.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/returning-school-after-lockdown>

The recovery curriculum: <https://barrycarpentereducation.com/2020/04/23/the-recovery-curriculum/>

'Policy pitfalls and new gaps to fall through'

Ricky has Down's Syndrome. He enjoyed regular attendance at his primary school where he was well supported. At the start of lockdown, the school provided good quality learning materials. However, this good start was not maintained as lockdown progressed. The school were initially very resistant to the idea of Ricky returning as lockdown was eased. He was so keen to return that, on a couple of occasions, he set out for school on his own. His mother has persuaded his teachers to take him back for a trial of two sessions a week. She remains concerned about him maintaining his place in mainstream. Discussions in the mothers' network of which she is a member reveal huge variation in the quality of work that is being sent out to children and in the extent to which schools are prepared to welcome children back after lockdown.

A number of new legislation and policy changes have come into effect during the pandemic. Of particular concern are the **changes to school exclusion policy**⁴, **behaviour policy guidelines**⁵, and **EHCP legislation**⁶. Depending on the way in which new regulations are interpreted, there were seen to be new voids created through changes in timelines for statutory processes and discharging duties 'as soon as reasonably practicable' along with a shift in terminology from 'reasonable adjustments' to 'reasonable endeavours'. These will impact particularly on children awaiting an EHCP and those on the threshold, as well as those who are permanently excluded and awaiting either a Governors' Disciplinary Committee (GDC) or Independent Review Panel (IRP). Our discussions have highlighted the importance of helping parents/carers to understand their legal entitlements and how to access support⁷, as well as schools having good knowledge of due processes and procedures, and ensuring that these rights are respected.

With schools being encouraged to update their behaviour policies to include new rules to ensure the health and safety of staff and students and abide by public health advice, there are concerns that schools will become far less tolerant of students who refuse to follow instructions and comply with expectations, which may result in an increase of both formal and informal exclusions. Stricter policies may also discriminate or unfairly increase the risk of exclusion for certain young people, for example, children who have conditions which make it hard for them to obey social distancing or working in 'bubbles'. While opinion differed, the overriding feeling was that punitive, zero-tolerance policies would not work and that schools must: 1) consider whether there are any underlying factors affecting behaviour, 2) make reasonable adjustments/endeavours, 3) ensure that their decisions comply with the Equality Act, and 4) consider alternatives such as adopting restorative practices⁸.

4 Exclusion policy changes:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion/changes-to-the-school-exclusion-process-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>

5 Behaviour policy changes: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider-opening-of-schools-from-1-june/planning-guide-for-primary-schools#annex-a-behaviour-principles>

6 Changes to EHCP legislation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modification-notice-ehc-plans-legislation-changes>

7 See: <https://justforkidslaw.org/school-exclusions-hub>

8 See for example: <http://www.restorativethinking.co.uk/>

'Children and young people who are not able to access the services and provision they need'

Brian is in Year 6 and is often anxious and aggressive at home and in school. There had been delays in getting a referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as he was felt to be a borderline case, but an appointment had come through just as the lockdown was imposed. Despite being deemed vulnerable and eligible to come to school his parents decided to keep him at home. He has not consistently done schoolwork and, although school have kept in contact, the family have become more distant and disengaged from school. Returning to school in June has been difficult; he has fallen out of the normal routines, is finding the restrictions that social distancing requires unsettling and is behaving increasingly erratically and aggressively towards staff and fellow students. There is now a backlog of more severe cases for CAMHS and it is unlikely he will get his appointment rescheduled until the autumn. Meanwhile the school are concerned how to support him to make the transition to secondary school in September.

'Pressure cooker families'

Sandra and Mike live with their dad in a very small two bedroom flat on the third floor of a medium rise block. Their father has an underlying health condition. He has lost his job as a result of Covid-19, and is struggling with the application for Universal Credit. Both children have taken on caring responsibilities and are worried about where their next meal will come from. Their school has offered to help them with food and clothing but their dad is reluctant to accept. Members of a local drug gang have befriended Mike, and offered him a way to provide for his family. Sandra feels that she must keep strong for her brother and father, and has started to bottle up her feelings.

Terry lives in the same block of flats with his Mum, her boyfriend and his baby brother. There is a long running dispute between the family and their neighbours which spills over into abusive language and threats. Terry has witnessed domestic violence. Terry, who has previously been excluded from school for several fixed periods, has on occasions during the lockdown also become violent towards his mother.

We heard a range of stories like Sandra, Mike and Terry's, where children and young people were 'absorbing the pressures of their parents' and practitioners were concerned about the long-term implications for their wellbeing and prospects for re-engagement with schooling. Early identification and intervention are needed to relieve the 'bottled up' pressures felt by these children to ensure they do not 'pop' and end up harming themselves, or others, or become vulnerable to exploitation.

The above examples clearly illustrate the complexity of the lives that some children and young people may be leading, and highlight the need for **multi-agency working**. In many instances schools have moved centre stage, becoming the main agency in contact with families. There has been some evidence of an acceleration of the sharing of data (provider-to-provider, service-to-service and clinician-to-clinician) and this could be built on, linking disciplines and agencies both operationally and strategically, connecting with people at the right level, and identifying common goals⁹. This may well require a sustainable culture shift as services recognise that solving the diverse needs of many vulnerable young people cannot be met by one service in isolation. Examples were given of the police funding school-based counsellors to support bereavement and implementing restorative practices to assist schools in handling incidents without impacting on crime reporting.

There were calls for the development of a strategy across services and effective signposting to guidance on self-referrals, together with suggestions for creating multi-agency clinics for schools to refer concerns to, with a rapid response system for children who fall below the traditional threshold for formal service support. These measures would support understanding the problem holistically and the challenges people face, and adopting a **contextual safeguarding** approach. Schools, in turn, were urged to engage more consistently with health and social services to access support and expertise. School nurses were seen to be well placed to support schools, providing a trusted and confidential role. They are often in a position to mediate between parents/carers and other professionals and understand local communities. We were told that the strategy in one Local Authority to prevent children 'going under the radar' is to have parent professional meetings with every vulnerable child before going back to school. These would involve looking at the child's needs in terms of learning and social/emotional support, the expectations of the school, and establishing clear aims and responsibilities to identify what the child needs when going into school. School leaders talked about the need to ensure that vulnerable young people were given dedicated access to teaching assistant time. They also gave accounts of schools (supported by voluntary organisations, donations, and careful use of their own budgets) adopting a more prominent role in providing other aspects of support, such as distributing food, clothes and toiletries. However, schools were anxious about budgets and even with the Department for Education offered funding¹⁰, the complexity of reclaiming has made the task unmanageable for some.

'The worried teacher'

Fatima is a teacher in an inner city school. She has lost two close relations to the pandemic and knows of many more in her community who have died. Fatima lives with her extended family and has become increasingly anxious about their vulnerability and safety. She has engaged with online teaching but is worried about her own children returning to school. Fatima is conflicted between her professional commitment to her students and her fear about a second surge of the pandemic.

Preparing the school community also came out as a priority from the discussions. School leaders and members of support services mentioned the importance of rebuilding relationships and trust. Our attention was drawn to the importance of making school spaces feel safe, so as to ensure people feel confident in returning. Regular means of keeping in touch with students and staff and plans for reintegration are being made. For example, schools spoke of identifying vulnerable children and helping them to reconnect simply by putting on their uniform and walking round the site prior to their return. Some schools are devising a rota in order that young people with SEND can attend on a regular 'short burst' basis with the same member of staff. Some Heads of Year are compiling lists of young people that are considered vulnerable in order that they can configure provision in a similar way. Staff are being asked to complete risk assessments for themselves and their students, and consider the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic families, and those living in lower socio-economic areas. Mental health, wellbeing, and bereavement support must be made available to both staff and students.

9 Violence Reduction Units may be one multi-agency mechanism to call upon: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-office-allocates-35-million-to-police-forces-for-violence-reduction-units>

10 Free school meals supplementary grant: 2019 to 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-school-meals-supplementary-grant-2019-to-2020>

Physical distancing requirements will increase the stresses on all children and staff, and loss of and changes in opportunities for social interaction may impact on wellbeing. This suggests that attention should be directed to new activities which foster a sense of connectedness, such as online tutor groups, assemblies, school newspapers, and games to prepare students, and more outside activities and experiential learning when they return. Some noted that a school's ability to provide such opportunities will be somewhat dependent on the space available on their school site.

A key message was that there is 'no short-term fix', and that prior planning and resourcing is essential to avoid being overwhelmed and more stressed in the long run. Proactive rather than reactive strategies are needed. Service leaders should consider both a universal offer and what additional support is required. School leaders must also screen for and identify at-risk groups through the use of key questions and joined-up working, so that plans and interventions can be put in place in advance to support both the emotional and educational aspects of transitioning back into school. Careful analysis of attendance data for vulnerable children must also be undertaken so that social care can assess need and provide additional and ongoing support where needed.

Time should also be given to upskilling teachers. The view was expressed that mental health and wellbeing should be seen to be everyone's business with all practitioners viewing this as part of their core work for their students and for one another. They will need the resources and training to do so. Teachers want more training in the support of social and emotional skills as an integral part of subject lessons. Training would also enable teachers to learn about the nature and impact of trauma on young people and to more confidently interpret and understand trauma related behaviours. There was concern expressed about the meaningfulness and adequacy of SEND, and Behaviour Management Plans, which need to incorporate goals that work for the children, parents, and teachers, particularly in this new era. Although there is some good online training available, it was felt that a system of quality assurance and on-going access to specialist advice and support was needed, with a possible role here for Psychological Services.

Overall, the need for **flexibility and new ways of working** was talked about loud and clear. Schools should be encouraged to challenge the place of inflexible behaviour policies, and work to gain a better understanding of why and how problem behaviours are arising and what practical support and guidance is needed. Schools will need to establish new rituals and routines and introduce flexibility in the curriculum. As well as new ways of working in schools, other practitioners talked about innovations and new services they have developed over the course of the pandemic. For example, CAMHS have developed online assessments tools, and are offering online support groups. These services have been welcomed by young people who were reluctant to attend face-to-face appointments and counselling. It is likely that these services will become permanent fixtures.

Conclusion

All children will have experienced some adverse effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, but for some these will be traumatic and long lasting and this may impact negatively on whether and how they return to school, and the likelihood of formal, informal and self-exclusion. Those adversely affected by COVID-19 are extremely diverse. This suggests there is a need to think beyond conventional and recognised categories of vulnerability. There was a strong view that close adherence to categories of risk is often unhelpful in that it can delimit responses and promote an assumption that there is a fixed response that can be made to those within a given category. We need to think about risk both clinically and socially and recognise complexity. There are no 'one size fits all' solutions. Some forms of need may be invisible at a moment in time and others may be forgotten. Needs will also fluctuate over time as the full impact of children's diverse and complex experiences emerge.

This calls for adopting a needs based holistic approach involving good collaboration and communication within and between services, and flexible and responsive curricula. Now is the time for schools to reconsider the role of education, take back control over their educational offer, and balance the pursuit for academic excellence with student wellbeing. Safeguarding and education are inextricably linked. Regulations need to allow for agile and flexible services that meet the needs of those most at risk. This has implications for a more thoughtful approach to risk management and GDPR, in order that we can ensure that children's entitlements are well met by provision. Both within and across services there was evidence for the importance of strategic development and early intervention. As one discussant said: "We have got to stop fishing victims out of the pond. We need to go upstream to stop the perpetrators".

Schools, who are well placed to be a key service, need supporting to be proactive rather than reactive in their approach. How schools plan to address these issues prior to children and young people returning will determine the ease with which students and staff transition back. Discussants expressed the view that greater investment in Continuing Professional Development was required. Teachers want more training in social and emotional development and how they can develop these skills as an integral part of subject lessons, as well as learning about the impact of trauma. There will not be quick fix solutions to the complex challenges that will be faced over a sustained period of time. Success will depend on dedicated thoughtful professional endeavour that is persistent in the face of considerable demands and pressures. It will also involve listening to the voices of children, young people and their families.

Resources

The following resources were suggested over the course of the virtual sessions and individual meetings:

- 111 mental health advice
- Chat health, service for teens led by Public Health England: <https://www.healthforteens.co.uk/health/about-chat-health/>
- Council for Disabled Children, find your local IAS service: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/information-advice-and-support-services-network/find-your-local-ias-service>
- Just for Kids Law, school exclusions hub: <https://justforkidslaw.org/school-exclusions-hub>
- NHS safeguarding: <http://www.myguideapps.com/projects/safeguarding/default/>
- Oxfordshire County Council, guidance on returning to school after lockdown: <http://schools.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/returning-school-after-lockdown>
- Oxfordshire Hospital School, from Covid-19 back to the classroom: a toolkit for meeting the emotional challenge: <https://ohs.oxon.sch.uk/from-covid-19-back-to-the-classroom/>
- Phoenix Education Consultancy, children's thoughts on returning to school: <https://www.phoenixgrouphq.com/back-to-school>
- Public Health England, prevention green paper ('prevention is better than cure'): <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2019/07/23/the-prevention-green-paper-a-chance-to-turn-talk-into-action/>
- Restorative Thinking: <http://www.restorativethinking.co.uk/>
- RSA, school return poll data: <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/bridges-campaign/fair-education/rsa-fair-education-full-poll-data.pdf>
- RSA, school return blog: <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2020/06/school-return-poll>
- RSA, blog post on ensuring all the burden does not end up on schools: <https://medium.com/@thersa/no-school-an-island-6b883826ba47>
- The Autism Education Trust: <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>
- The National Autistic Society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

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