



Re-engaging with education

The causes, risks and implications of disengagement from education, and how we might do things differently

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Background

In the light of the government's '[Attendance counts](#)' campaign, this seminar explored the following questions:

- To what extent does the government's 'Attendance counts' campaign acknowledge and address the underlying issues that lead to persistent absence?
- What are the causes of disengagement from education?
- What are the implications of this disengagement from education?
- How might we imagine things differently?

Speakers

- Dr Ian Thompson — Co-Principal Investigator, Excluded Lives: The Political Economies of School Exclusion, University of Oxford
- Steve Chalke — Founder, Oasis Charitable Trust
- Ellie Costello — Director, Square Peg
- Kerrigen Marriner — Head of Behaviour and Attendance Service, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

This policy seminar was held on 21 June 2024. This policy paper summarises the speakers' presentations, and the plenary discussion involving all attendees. PowerPoint slides of the speakers' presentation can be downloaded from the Forum website.

About the SEN Policy Research Forum

The SEN Policy Research Forum contributes intelligent analysis, knowledge and experience to promote the development of policy and practice for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), from 0-25 years, across the UK.

Our membership includes academics, researchers, policy consultants, advocates, and representatives from local authorities and voluntary organisations. We host regular, open [policy seminars](#) on SEND-related topics. The proceedings are written up into [policy papers](#), and published on our website.

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Excluded Lives: Disciplinary school exclusion and SEND

Dr Ian Thompson – Co-Principal Investigator, Excluded Lives: The Political Economies of School Exclusion, University of Oxford

The ESRC-funded [Excluded Lives](#) project, *The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences* (2019-2024) has explored the policy and practice of different rates of school exclusion across the UK. Overall numbers of permanent exclusions and suspensions rose rapidly in England before the Covid-19 pandemic and have risen sharply since in contrast to the rest of the UK. The high figures in England disproportionately affect children and young people with special educational or mental health needs, from care backgrounds, who live in poverty, and from particular ethnic backgrounds.

Exclusion rates vary by type of special educational need, with the highest rates of exclusion found for children with social emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties who do not have an Education, Health and Care Plan. We have argued that in circumstances of challenge and limited resources, there is a heightened risk that pupils with SEMH can become collateral casualties of policy change (Thompson, Tawell & Daniels, 2021; Daniels, Thompson & Emery, 2023).

To study the influence of context and education policy at these various geographical scales, the Excluded Lives study adopted the ‘home international’ comparison approach (Raffe & Byrne, 2005) to the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data from across the UK. The four jurisdictions of the UK share a national government and economy, but through devolution have separate education systems and political economies of school exclusions that are shaped by different educational histories and cultures.

Our research involved academics from a variety of disciplines across five UK universities (Cardiff, Edinburgh, LSE, Oxford and Queen’s Belfast). The project also engaged with Young People’s Research Advisory Groups and a range of stakeholders and experts through our Knowledge Exchange and Advisory boards.

In the research we conducted comparative policy analyses and talked to schools, alternative provision (AP), local authorities (LA), parents/carers and children and other services about their experiences of exclusion. Whilst there are some differences in the social and economic conditions of students and schools in each jurisdiction these are significantly less marked than differences in full international comparisons.

The negative educational effects of exclusion are well documented, and our research has also further highlighted long term detrimental consequences for exclusion on both health (Obsuth et al., 2023) and employment (Madia et al., 2022) as well as financial implications.

Our research has shown that whilst contradictory pressures around inclusion and educational performance exist in all four jurisdictions they are mediated by historical and cultural practices at government, local authority and school level. Schools across the UK face challenges around issues including recruitment and retention of staff, funding (particularly around SEND), and increasing rates of persistent pupil non-attendance after the pandemic.

However, England has been the jurisdiction where the pressures on schools to perform most outweighs commitments to inclusion. These differences are reflected in the language used in policy documents around exclusion and inclusion. For example, in Scotland the focus is on relationships whereas in England the emphasis is on the behaviour of individual students and headteachers' right to exclude. Yet even with the highest excluding jurisdiction of England there is huge variation and there are schools that do not routinely exclude despite similar social and demographic contexts.

The project identified system level factors that may be influencing the higher rates of exclusion in England.

- Policy positions in England prioritise school performance and behaviour over inclusion
- Competitive education system brings accountability pressures that can lead to perverse incentives to exclude
- Narrowing of the curriculum
- Fragmentation of the education system
- Under resourcing of key services in times of increased need
- Lack of early intervention
- Difficulties in multi-agency working.

However, not all schools in England are high excluders and the following factors were identified as examples of good practice.

- Schools who view the outside community as part of the solution and build positive relationships with parents/carers, rather than adopting a deficit view of the family/community and seeing them as the problem
- Strong wraparound support links between local services and teams, including between, for example, schools and AP providers, LA and AP providers, schools and LA teams, and schools and health services
- Services that adopt relational approaches

We also identified key areas of **shared responsibility for social inclusion** that might influence a theory of change for developing inclusive and relational practice (Table 1). The challenge for schools in England and the new Labour government is how to address issues of equity and inclusion in schools in a period of multiple pressures on schools and their students.

Table 1. Shared responsibility for social inclusion

Policy matters	Shared vision based on inclusive principles Being alert to unintended consequences and avoiding policy contradictions Getting the balance right
Structures matter	Redesigning structures that impede inclusion and redistributing resources
Collaboration matters	Shared responsibility Sharing of information and ideas
Culture matters	Inclusive leadership Fostering a sense of belonging and safety Moving from punitive and exclusionary to relational and inclusive practices
Language matters	Inclusive language in policy documentation

References

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Atypical: An education system that works for all

Summary of the presentation by Steve Chalke – Founder, Oasis Charitable Trust

Steve introduced himself as the founder of the [Oasis Trust](#) which runs 54 primary and secondary schools, and soon to be adding more. Oasis was set up to help young people and build healthy community, rather than simply run schools. He reminded us that if a child attends school every day that school is open, is never ill or late, they will still be in school for less than 20% of the year.

He then went on to make the point that therefore, when we talk about exclusion, this is taken to be code for exclusion from school. However, in thinking this way, we make a huge mistake. What does that child do with the other 80% of their time? Where are they? Who is influencing them? What are they experiencing? When an exclusion or 'managed move' from a school takes place, for Oasis it is always a tragic outcome and a very last resort. It is a symptom of other things breaking down in the rest of a child's life, and/or of a school being so under-resourced that it cannot cope with their special educational needs.

In spite of the facts, society has a way of regarding the problem of exclusion as a 'school issue'. Recent research has been carried out by the Evening Standard with parents and others around what they believe schools should be doing to tackle student absenteeism, poor mental health, exclusion and criminality. The list is very long – around 500 items long! Schools cannot possibly do this job alone. Exclusion is a wide societal issue not simply a school responsibility. Though, of course, schools have a vital part to play in combatting it, they cannot tackle this alone.

More than that, Oasis's experience and role is to turn schools around. In the next few months, two new schools will join Oasis. Both have been judged by Ofsted as 'inadequate'. Schools, he said, only join Oasis because they are in a muddle. But, when they join, we become responsible for everything – the students, the staff and all its systems, just as they are – so it's often a long road forward. However, at the same time, even a school judged by Ofsted as 'outstanding' always 'requires improvement'! The moment any of us lose our desire to improve, we decline; this applies to schools too.

He said he does not speak of the problem of exclusion representing an organisation that has cracked it - but someone representing a movement that is working hard on it – but always seeking partnership with community in it. Oasis employs about 5,000 teaching staff in their schools. They come from different backgrounds, with various philosophies of education and contrasting experience and training. The task is ever in front of us.

Therefore, a foundational issue in education, if we are to make the biggest impact on exclusion possible, is for society to answer the question; what is education? What does it consist of? What do you want from it? This impacts what we believe about teacher training, who we want to recruit? For what purpose? And will address the task of retention, as well as pedagogy, curriculum,

assessment and inspection – to name a few. How best do we prepare children for life? What are the insights of neuroscience around childhood and adolescent brain development and learning styles? How do we apply this understanding to our task?

He asked the audience how many were bored at school? Looking round it seemed like the majority had been. He explained that he was bored at school. He was always told at school, ‘Chalke you are a disgrace, you will never achieve anything’. In fact, this was the mantra feed to the whole school. We were being prepared to ‘work with our hands, not our heads’, for the production line etc.

The reality, as he sees it, is that so many children are ‘failed by’ the system rather than ‘failing at’ education. They are bored. Unless education is magnetic for them we will get nowhere. If a child does not learn the way they are taught, then we must teach the way they learn. The problem is often talked about as though it is theirs, but it is ours. But once excluded, the child’s life becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy ; ‘I’m a bad kid, the type that doesn’t fit’; ‘the misfit and the one that no teacher likes’.

He mentioned that if he told the story of one person, he could tell the story of a hundred children who had become that self-fulfilling prophecy because they just did not fit in.

Here he introduced David, who is an Oasis staff member, who was very bored at school. David, he explained, ended up in some criminal activity because he was so bored. When someone is bored, they find something else to get involved in. He invited us to chat with David in the discussion activity beyond his talk.

He explained that this was an extraordinary moment for us all. It was highly likely that the Labour party would win the general election and come to Government in two weeks’ time. Their manifesto set out in several paragraphs what they want to do about school exclusions and youth violence, such as creating ‘Future Youth Hubs’ in every community.

Oasis has had some input into this manifesto wording. But, as he explained, a manifesto is an ambition, not a policy, The Labour Manifesto talks about achieving this by the end of 2028/29. There is £95 million set aside for these non-exclusion approaches each year, but this sum is a drop in the bucket. In 2021 Sir Kevan Collins was asked by Boris Johnson to do some thinking about what it would take to for schools and children to recover children’s mental, social and emotion health following the pandemic. Collins said it would cost schools £15.3 billion. The government offered a billion. Sir Kevan resigned, and his expertise is now used in other countries around the world.

He also mentioned how during the pandemic he had been asked to address a group of psychologists and psychiatrists online. This was when we were all abiding by the lockdown rules (well most of us!). A psychiatrist, who was also a speaker at this conference explained that – ‘studies reveal that everyone obeys the rules at this stage of an emergency, but the result will

eventually see in a new level of disrespect for rules and lawlessness. He suggested that this statement had been prophetic. There is a lot to be done.

He made the point that Oasis is not a think-tank as much as a do-tank. 'We do not research systems so much as a do the work through which our systems develop.'

David was there with him because there are two projects he wanted to talk about which provide ways of addressing what we have already talked about; the reason for exclusions – neurodiversity, trauma, mental health, abuse and poverty (including intergenerational poverty in the life of a family. But he commented that he knew of parents with two mobile phones; one for friends and family, the other for school and social services. They are scared of us; they avoid us like the plague.

Oasis examined the 2022 SEND Green Paper, which stated that we need to end school exclusions because they become a self-fulfilling prophecy over the course of a child's life. It said our goal should always be to do all we can not to remove a child from mainstream school. This is not simply for the educational reasons, but because to separate them from their peer group; where they are growing both socially and emotionally through belonging, to short sighted and detrimental.

So, from this September Oasis have obtained two large empty schools in London and Liverpool. Oasis will set up two educational villages. He then talked about the London one, to be called [Oasis St Martin's Village](#). Calling it a village is a deliberate move; it is not there to compete the local with schools, but to support them. Just as the Green Paper recommended there will be three tiers of intervention and care for those who are struggling with school and on verge of exclusion:

Tier 1 will provide supplementary education and support, not just for the child but for parents; in the evening from 3pm onwards (the time of day when children are most likely to be drawn into the arms of a gang; the time they are most likely to be involved in or the victim of violence). This is about working with children around the school day along with their parents, where possible, to support them, as well as at weekends and through the holidays. Oasis is making an offer to all schools in the area for children at Key stages 1, 2 and 3, based on the principle that that the earlier you begin investing in children, the more effective and impactful the work. Also, tragically, many KS4 students are already embedded in gang life. Indeed, the gang leaders tell Oasis to 'focus on the primary school children', 'we don't want a good thing to be ruined by us'. 'Give the children support and hope'.

Tier 2 will provide an opportunity for children come out of school for an afternoon a week etc.

Tier 3 is for children who need longer out of mainstream school. Tiers 1 and 2 can be set up without DfE engagement. Tier 3 requires a school unit to provide ongoing education, so therefore DfE permission and registration. Oasis has been talking with both the Labour and Conservatives parties about this.

Why is this development important?

Because of the falling roles in schools due to demographic changes, there are a growing number of empty classrooms and schools, available to be used in this way around the country. Oasis calls it a 'village' because it takes a village to raise a child, but it also knows that then the child raises the village.

Oasis works with the local community wherever it works. This is about using music, art, sport, delivered by local community groups, all committed to providing a therapeutic approach and care.

David has now become the chaplain at [Oasis Restore](#) which opens in August in Rochester. It has cost around £50 million to build and open. From then, a judge will be able to send any adolescent who has fallen into conflict with the law to Oasis rather than one of the Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs). All Oasis Restore's students will have committed violent crime and be housed in what is a highly secure setting. But Oasis work begins with the question 'what has happened to you?' rather than what is wrong with you?

We know that the vast majority of children who are locked up in the UK are neurodiverse, looked after, atypical learners, have grown up in poverty, and/ or have been traumatised by neglect, abuse or household violence. Oasis Restore provides a trauma-informed healing process.

So, the big question? Why is this type of therapeutically based education not available to all children. All behaviour is communication. All behavioural needs are, in fact, special educational needs.

He showed a PowerPoint slide – a picture of a frog. A frog lays many eggs. Some are eaten by other fish, some make it to be tadpoles. Some of these are get eaten by fish or picked up by kids who put them in a jar for a few weeks. A few make it all the way to be frogs. The point is that frogs, like most amphibians offer little care to their young. Parenting is short lacks ongoing support. However, most birds and mammals do offer some, though varying levels of care to their young. But humans are in a different category, and by far the most complex socially of all mammals.

Humans are distinct because throughout our long childhood we are dependent on our parental figures, and as we enter adolescence and beyond, on other role model figures as well. This is known as 'alloparenting' (other parenting).

He then related a recent conversation with a mother in Croydon who cried in front of him. She sends her children to one of the Oasis schools. She told him about getting up at 6am each morning, getting the children out of bed, getting them dressed, breakfasted, and to school, before driving home to get herself ready for work. She then takes the train to London to the office, works all day, before catching the train home, to collect the car to pick up her children. She gets them home, cooks them a meal, helps them with their homework, then gets them ready for bed. She

sits with them, reads to them and finally comes downstairs to work through her emails, before heading for bed. The next thing she knows the alarm sounds and it all begins again. She burst into tears. "I can't do it anymore. I am not enough!" The point is, of course, that she is isn't enough; she was never meant to be enough. No one could be enough. He explained that we are all made for community.

His final point; though many schools have behaviour policies, he believes this is a deep mistake. At a recent education conference he was speaking at, the participants talked about curriculum and pedagogy as if they are alternative terms for the same or a similar thing. They are not, and until we deal with pedagogy – the way to lead the child to learn – until we understand teaching and learning as a therapeutic task, until we understand that we are all atypical, we will not move forward. Until we recognise that we all have special educational needs, we will get nowhere. But as we begin to understand that we will develop more effective policies around this. As a result we will discover that our behaviour polices become increasingly redundant. Why? Because all behaviour is communication. It is impossible to deal with behaviour unless you deal with the drivers of that behaviour. In other words, what we often consider to be behavioural problems are, in reality, unmet special educational needs.

When, and only when, we understand and grapple with that, will we move forward.

The attendance crisis

Summary of the presentation by Ellie Costello — Director, Square Peg; Not Fine in School

[Square Peg](#) works in the area of school non-attendance and supports children, young people and their families with any barriers to participation in education. The group also works with any professionals that support children and young people. Square Peg was established in 2019 as a social enterprise and is interested in bringing lived experience directly to the top table. The group works to improve life for children, young people and their families experiencing school-based anxiety.

In 2020, Square Peg became a community interest company (CIC). Square Peg has developed to include support for low and non-attenders including children and young people who have been excluded on the grounds of behaviour, those who are too anxious to be in school, as well as groups of children and young people who feel disengaged from their settings. The group campaigns to influence policy and practice.

[Not Fine in School](#) is a group that supports families and professionals to discuss school attendance difficulties and to share information. There are three closed Facebook Groups: one for families, one for parents and professionals in alliance, and one for professionals only.

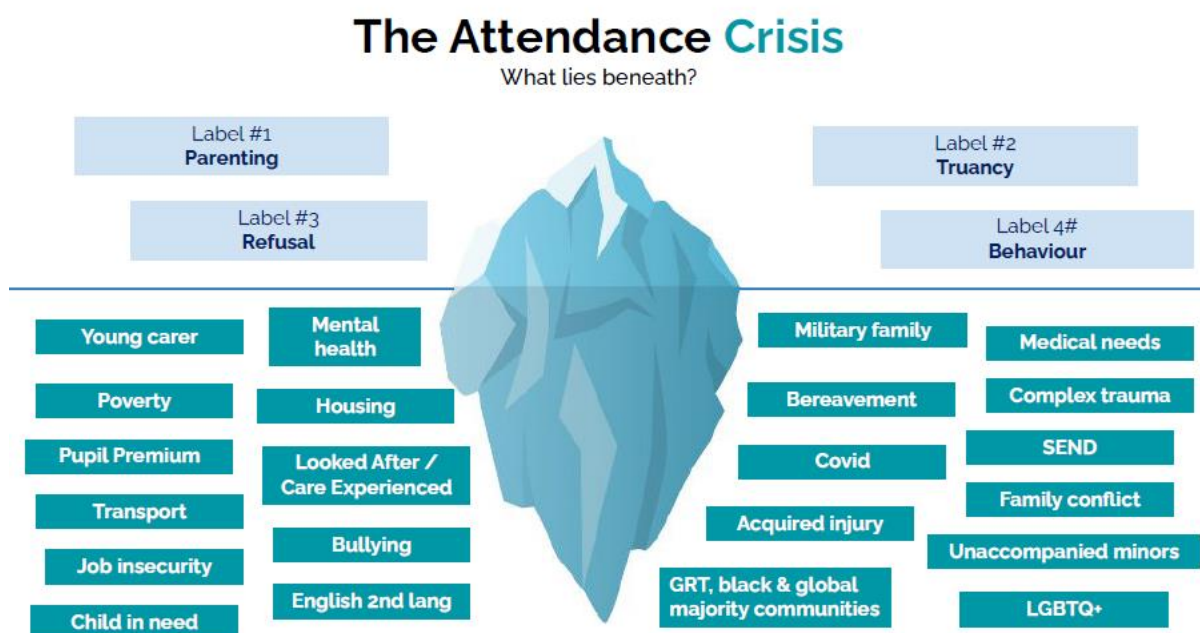
One of the aspects that Square Peg seeks to address is to support education settings to understand that parents and carers recognise when their children are struggling with school and the school says: “They are fine here – don’t worry about it”. For parents, having their views recognised and validated is important. Ellie explained that many parents are watching in despair as their children become unwell, are subject to exclusion or may become a flight risk.

When Ellie joined the organisation there were fewer than a thousand members of the informal organisation in its nascency offering peer to peer support. Information and advice are provided via the closed Family Support Facebook group as well as via a website. By May 2024, there were 59,300 members. The growth has been propelled and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic alongside Government focus on attendance performance and new national guidance, but the problems faced by many were most definitely a pre-pandemic issue that was not talked about and acknowledged widely.

Ellie ascribes the start of her own family’s experiences of feeling like ‘square pegs’ in school to the introduction of the coalition government’s educational policies from 2012 with a focus on attainment and behaviour and the impact of austerity on allied services and school budgets. She related her own experiences of the system.

The ‘attendance crisis’ is often labelled as being caused by parents, school refusal, truancy and behaviour. Here the difficulties are firmly placed within the child, young person and their families and this is a common narrative. It is important to remember that the child or young person should be viewed holistically when considering their attendance. The underlying issues are often overlooked. These issues include a wide range of vulnerabilities highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The attendance crisis: What lies beneath?



In February 2022, Square Peg and Not Fine in Schools designed and launched an online survey in response to the Department for Education’s [consultation on attendance](#) (January 2022). The survey was live for ten days, and there were 1,960 responses. The aim of the survey was to gather responses to explore the impact of the government’s attendance policy.

A [report](#) was published on Square Peg’s website. Ellie highlighted a theme that arose was parent blaming. When parents are already worried about their child, it is concerning that an additional layer of stress is added to the situation. Parent guilt is an area that should be supported in a compassionate way, particularly when a family has tried to manage behind closed doors for a very long time. It is important that professionals have the initial conversations about their child’s attendance in a kind and caring way. Parents and carers also feel that their child’s attitude is often criticised. Children are often described as ‘wilful’, ‘lazy’, ‘manipulative’, ‘not trying hard enough’, and ‘just trying it on’. How we talk about children, young people and families really matters both when they are in the room and outside of it.

Pressure at school was cited as the top reason that has a negative impact on mental health (59% of respondents), with 49% of respondents saying that exam pressure was another contributory factor. Some children mask for extended periods of time until they are subsequently diagnosed with hidden disabilities, additional learning needs, chronic illness or are recognised as young carers.

Another factor to consider in the attendance crisis is the coding used by schools for reasons for non-attendance. This can lead to a data gap paradox. The coding can be very subjective. Ellie explained that more than 40% of persistent absences have no formally recorded reason for absence.

In the previously mentioned survey, families described 'forced attendance' being used to improve attendance rates. This usually takes a behaviourist approach and there is the expectation that the learner will 'push on through'. There has been very little research into this area, but the survey found that 40% of respondents were told to force attendance and 36% were pressurised to do so. Only 1% of respondents replied that this approach helped.

Respondents were asked to rate the best to worst strategies for supporting attendance in school. The following were identified as the least helpful strategies to encourage attendance:

- A home visit (8%)
- Robust school policies (7%)
- Zero tolerance on behaviour (7%)
- Information around the importance of school attendance for safeguarding and attainment (4%)
- Prioritising attainment (4%)
- Setting high expectations (3%)
- Info on parental duty to ensure attendance (2%)
- Referral to a parenting course (2%)
- Fines or prosecutions (1%)
- Physically forcing attendance (1%)

Interestingly, many of these strategies can be found in the language of government policy. Ellie outlined how the families' experience of the system employing these strategies was described as intrusive, presumptive, invasive and arousing. It can be destabilising and disabling and there is a power imbalance with families left feeling as though they have been 'done to'.

There is much that needs to be in place to enable a learner to attend school regularly both in school and in the community. Ellie outlined that families feel that the following would help:

- Flexibility (90%)
- Reasonable adjustments (87%)
- Prioritising wellbeing and happiness (86%)
- Staff training (86%)
- Kindness (83%)
- Pastoral and mental health support (82%)
- Proactive SENCO (82%)
- Trusting parental opinion/experience (82%)
- Accommodations/creative thinking (79%)
- Inclusion for SEND and ill health (79%)

There are two key opportunities that should be considered by policy makers and educational settings:

1. To develop stronger partnerships with families: a keystone of strong schools and
2. To engage in honest dialogue about the tensions within the system that can act as barriers to developing stronger partnerships.

Ellie highlighted how the [National Health Service values](#) that could be harnessed to improve the system. These are:

1. Respect and dignity
2. Commitment to quality of care
3. Compassion
4. Improving lives
5. Working together for patients (this could be translated to pupils)
6. Everyone counts.

By moving towards a transparent and authentic approach to co-production in which shared problem solving and collaboration is foregrounded would support children, young people, their families and professionals to develop an equitable approach to addressing their concerns about school.

Ellie concluded her presentation by explaining that the attendance crisis is an opportunity to do things differently and try alternatives. Everyone should acknowledge that there are always exceptional circumstances and we are not going to get everything right all the time. Relationships can always be repaired and empathy is important. Remember, we are all human.

Disengagement with education

Summary of the presentation by Kerrigen Marriner — Head of Behaviour and Attendance Service, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Kerrigen explained that in Tower Hamlets, school non-attendance is the ‘top layer’ of other several issues: poverty; overcrowded housing; physical and mental illness; safeguarding problems; and the related impact of Covid-19. Schools in Tower Hamlets are mostly ‘Good’ and ‘Outstanding’. Attendance was not an issue before Covid-19. There has been a clear impact of the pandemic on attendance levels, especially in primary.

Barriers to school attendance in primary include: anxiety and a sense of overwhelm (sensory and social) due to academic pressures; unmet SEND; relationship issues; worries about the home environment; puberty-related issues; cost of living crisis; insecure housing; frequent transitions; bullying and/or discrimination; and fear of sanctions. This is a profile that isn’t exclusive to Tower Hamlets, and mirrors many of the difficulties faced by schools and families nationally.

Kerrigen underlined the role of communication as likely one of the key elements within this web of barriers to attendance. In this reading, communication is seen as ‘are we all thinking the same thing?’ and ‘are we all speaking the same language?’ – not literally, but rather in terms of everyone involved in provision interpreting needs and situations in alignment with each other (e.g. CAMHS, school, parents, etc.).

In this context, it has been useful for Kerrigen’s Behaviour and Attendance team to look at Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). This is conceived of as an umbrella term to describe the avoidance (but not refusal) to engage and participate in school – ‘in but not in’. Educational Psychology services are heavily involved in reflecting with the team on what may not currently be done that may help address this issue.

EBSA is understood as stress exceeding support provided and pupils not being sufficiently heard in that respect. It is, however, a difficult concept to measure and grasp, but with significant impact on outcomes. Because the anxiety about school and negativity decreases through avoidance, a cycle of maintenance of school avoidance emerges and becomes more and more ingrained in the everyday functioning.

Covid-19 was particularly detrimental for children. Children stayed at home 24/7 with their families, and now they are required to not be at home at all. For children with separation anxiety, this transition is particularly difficult to deal with. Changes and transitions with these children need to be very slow, gradual and long-term.

Tower Hamlets look to work on a systemic approach, but there is always room for improvement in involving others, including the community, and making the most of the community-based resources available.

Moving forward, Kerrigen suggests:

- Learning from Covid and using this as an opportunity to think differently about what is best for children. 'Is being back to normal the best'? It is suggested that perhaps a middle point must be considered
- Implementing specific interventions in schools need to be in place that specifically train parental anxiety and support parents through this process
- Improving multi-agency working; including social workers, so they also see good attendance as important, as views here can differ
- Engaging with the community. Messages around attendance cannot centre on attainment alone, but rather on becoming a safe space and helping students become social beings.

Kerrigen concluded by saying that schools can no longer meet the contract that they are the safest spaces for children. Since Covid-19 that is no longer the case, and we need a new contract, moving forward.

Plenary summary

This summary collates comments, feedback and verbatim quotes from delegates, following group discussions about the seminar topic.

There was general agreement that the ‘Attendance Counts’ campaign had not only not worked with all populations, but had driven a ‘bigger wedge between school and families’. The campaign failed to pay full regard to the myriad factors that contribute towards school non-attendance and disengagement.

The school-level factors identified as impediments are the same ones that pose a threat to sustainable inclusive practice, specifically the effects of high-stakes accountability, ‘a dry, irrelevant and bloated curriculum’, and continuous assessment.

Poverty and the rising cost-of-living – factors exacerbated by the pandemic – are known to drive disengagement with school. If transport is unaffordable or inaccessible, or if a family is moved into social housing miles/hours away, attending school becomes all the more challenging.

In addition to disadvantaged families, there are ‘middle class families accessing CAMHS’, which have been ‘squeezed out’ of the attendance conversation and need support. There is a general reticence to discuss the ‘school to CAMHS pipeline’.

Some young people falling into this category require places in specialist therapeutic provisions, which can cost ~£280k per year. This price tag alone helps to make the case for early intervention, in order to avoid the catalogue of failure that young people can experience in terms of being let down not just by the education system, but by health, care, and policing and the justice system.

Quite apart from the moral and social justice justification for action, there is a clear economic case for ‘dealing with things upstream, not downstream’. That inclusive policies ‘pay for themselves’ in the long-term ought to be attractive to a government primarily interested in value for money – if nothing else.

From the early banning of mentions of ‘inclusion’ under the Cameron-era government to the conflicting policies and guidance issued to schools – some of which are coercive (e.g. exclusions), some more supportive – the inconsistency and incoherence of policy and a general absence of a clear direction were identified as impediments to progress.

With a change in government expected at the time of the seminar, delegates indicated the opportunity to influence an incoming government in its first few months in power. There was a hope that ministers and policymakers would engage with schools and families to understand

and address challenges. There was a particular emphasis on politicians paying attention to ‘experiential data’: listening to people’s lived experience and appreciating the depth and complexities of the issues, and listening to their ideas and suggestions for how things could improve.

There were two broad levels at which suggestions were made: strategic and operational. In terms of the long-term strategy for inclusion, the message to an incoming government was to prioritise the development of ‘high level aspirational statements’ about SEND and inclusion in their manifesto (where they exist) into a ‘clear statement of the value of inclusion at a national level’. Clarification on this could then act as a ‘north star’ guiding policy and action.

There was a view that the government needs to pursue the ‘right sort of inclusion’, which emphasises a sense of belonging and community – a conceptualisation encompassing parent/carers and school staff. ‘Truly inclusive accountable schools, which value and welcome every child, are rooted in equity, social justice, compassion and care’ [and] have a more expansive view of outcomes, which goes beyond the narrowness of academic results, and celebrates a wide range of meaningful achievements.

In terms of families, a child or young person struggling to attend school ‘is an invitation to support, not to sanction, threaten, coerce, propel into an institutionally harmful lens of scrutiny and judgement’. In this sense, there is a need to support families and for professionals to avoid any language or suggestion of blame. This recognises the reality that problems are systemic/at the system-level, not ‘within-person’.

The point about staff feeling included is a counterpoint to the view that teachers feel deprofessionalised, and need/want to reconnect with their ‘pedagogical birthright’. One group suggested that the question of “who was your favourite teacher?” can be used to explore and distil the essence of what makes for an engaging teacher; someone who motivates young people who are/are at risk of struggling to attend school. Also, the system needs to not only train new teachers appropriately, but needs to inspire confidence and promote the ‘joy of working with diversity’.

At the operational level, delegates pointed to existing resources that could drive immediate action and secure early wins for a new government. There is ‘no need to reinvent wheel’. There is evidence on which a new government can act (e.g. emotional intelligence; preparation for adulthood), as well as a suggestion that there is unspent capital funding that could be quickly leveraged. One suggestion was to use these funds to establish ‘inclusion hubs’ in local areas, which bring together local expertise in order to identify and drive improvement. Another idea was to establish a key worker service accessible for every child at risk of CAMHS, exclusion or truancy, which is ‘empowered to unblock the blockers around the family, work with them and alongside them for as long as they need’.