

Dealing with permanent exclusion of pupils



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This paper examines the stresses and pressures that the permanent exclusion of pupils can have on school leaders and the effects that the attempt at reducing the number of permanent exclusions has on them. The issue of exclusion is a major problem due to both human and economic costs. Due to the damage exclusion can cause, it should be the desire of all involved that it be reduced, and understanding the strains and pressures involved allows for an understanding on what kind of person is psychologically best positioned to initiate a change in school culture, to ultimately reduce exclusions. The investigation was carried out using a theoretically based approach, relying upon educational and psychological health literatures resulting in providing an understanding of the role that the head teacher plays facilitating the relationship between the government and the school, explaining the link between school improvement and changes in school culture. It is concluded that a leadership role is not for all who may desire it; it takes a specific type of person. One who has the capacity to deal with a high workload and stress is best positioned to deal with a leadership role, and that there is an effort to produce leaders of the future with these characteristics.

Introduction

When pupil behaviour becomes an issue, it seems that time and time again the ultimate solution seems to be the permanent exclusion of a pupil. It seems that increasingly, if a problem cannot be easily fixed, it is removed. It is clear however that the human cost of exclusion is vast, including damage to the excluded pupil, the school and the fellow pupils of the excluded pupil (Cooper et al., 2000, p5-7). From this, an interest has grown in the role of

school leaders who deal with these issues, as well as the impact it has on them.

The aims for this paper are, to analyse the relationship between government and schools, to investigate the link between school improvement and changes in school culture, and how the increased workload and the dilemmas that present themselves in the exclusion process impact on school leaders in terms of pressure and emotions.

In the early nineteen-nineties, the annual school exclusion rate increased dramatically reaching a peak of 13, 041 in 1997/8 (Parsons, 1999, p. 2). As a result the government set a target of reducing this figure to 8, 400 by 2002, a target that was met early for the 1999/2000 school year where exclusions fell to 8, 300 ([www. teachernet. gov. uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)). Perhaps troublingly however, the figures for 2001/2 once again saw an increase to 9, 535 permanent exclusions (ibid.), with the DCSF recording fluctuations in these rates between then and 2007 (DCSF, 2008, p. 2).

In an investigation looking into the effects of permanent exclusions in school, it would be pertinent to attempt to understand why pupils are excluded at all. A school is an environment where pupils and teachers coexist and according to Tripp (1993, p. 8; 1994, p. 66) a number of 'critical incidents' take place in this collaboration. These can include both major and minor episodes, as, according to Tripp, a critical incident is "an interpretation of the significance of an event" (1993, p. 8). Therefore as Angelides and Ainscow (2000) clarify, critical incidents are not necessarily "sensational events involving noticeable tensions" but can also include relatively minor

events that can occur in every classroom (p. 152). In summary a critical incident is the interpretation of the criticality of any event; this could be one in a series of small incidents, or a single substantial event. The significance of this is accentuated when the evidence provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is observed. For the academic year 2006/7, two of the most common reasons for permanent exclusion were persistent disruptive behaviour, and verbal abuse/ threatening behaviour, 31% and 10% respectively (2008, p. 3).

The importance of exclusion to society as a whole cannot be understated. The financial cost to society as estimated by Parsons and Castle (1998) for the 1995/6 academic year was in the region of £71 million with a predicted increase to £81 million the year after (p. 290). Another matter of high consequence to society is the proportion of excluded people among young offenders. According to the 1996 Audit Commission in their survey of young offenders (Jones, 1996, p. 67), 42% had been excluded from school. Although there is no proven link between crime and exclusion, the figures provide good reason for the suspicion that they are somehow connected. As a result of this as well as the statistics of increased exclusions, the government set the aforementioned targets.

School Improvement

School improvement is the aspiration and the implementation of significant, productive and enduring change in the context of a single or multiple school(s) (Hord, 1987a in Eskil Stegö et al., 1987, p. 13). School improvement can be desired and prescribed externally - usually by

government - or internally by members of the school leadership team. When change is desired by external influences, Hord describes the role of the Primary School Leader (PSL) as a delegate, charged with the implementation of the proposed targets. When referring to the primary school leader I will mean the person at the top of the school hierarchy, in the English context the PSL is the head teacher.

“ The leader is the intermediary between internal and external interests and, as personal representative of the school, is the natural, immediate target for any and all concerned groups or individuals.” (1987a, in Eskil Stegö et al., 1987, p. 15)

According to Harris (2002, p. 73), “ The role of the leader in school improvement is to ensure that the school is a learning environment for both staff and students.” It can be understood that a plan to reduce the low level disruptions in the classroom would improve the learning environment, it is therefore important that a school leader should implement improvement to achieve a reduction in the number of permanent exclusions. By implementation I refer to the definition provided by Hord (1987c, in Eskil Stegö et al., 1987, p. 71), described as “ the phase or sub-process of school improvement in which the real transition from the theory to practice is made.”

Fullan (1982) emphasises the importance of the PSL to the implementation of school improvement, summarising, “ Those (principals) who do become involved have a strong influence on how well the change progresses ; those who don't show an interest have an equally powerful influence on how poorly

it goes," (p. 135). It is for this reason, ineffective schools, defined as schools that cannot improve themselves and are likely to be stuck (Rosenholtz, 1989 cited in Stoll & Fink, 1996, p. 85), should make some fundamental changes including a change at leadership level, including the head teacher and senior management, such is their importance to school improvement (Hopkins and Reynolds 2001, p. 465).

Changing school culture

It is important to understand what is meant by culture in order to investigate what school culture is. Holliday (2007, p. 12) defines culture as an "uncountable noun that refers to cohesive behaviour and a basic feature of the human condition". Paliokosta and Blandford (2010, p. 181) explain the specificity of the term culture in relation to a school environment using the definition of Deal and Paterson (2009, p. 6), mentioning that although there are other terms that are interchangeable such as ethos and climate "the term culture provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations".

There are continual reminders of the importance of school culture to school improvement whenever change is being implemented in school. Angelidis and Ainscow (2000) make this clear by explaining that; "school improvement and effectiveness research has continued to draw attention to the significance of school cultures in educational reform" (p. 146), in summary, school improvement is necessary to initiate a change in school culture. According to Hord, the school leaders, the agents of this change,

have a great impact upon the success or failure of implemented changes stating that “ School leaders can have a powerful effect, whether positive or negative, on school improvement.” (1987a, in Eskil Stegö et al., 1987, p. 16)

It is therefore clear that school leaders must have an infallible knowledge in its entirety of school culture, in order to assure they have the capacity to improve, supported by the assessment of Angelidis and Ainscow that “ if improvement is our business, schools will have to find ways of understanding themselves better in terms of those factors that shape their working practices.” (2000, p. 146)

It seems pertinent to ask, what changes if implemented, would reduce the number of exclusions? It makes sense to assume that if the requirements for exclusion were more acrimonious, the number of those excluded would decrease. Disruptive behaviour in the classroom, although trivial and common in the classroom, when sustained over a long period is the largest single contributor to permanent exclusions in England. If the number of permanent exclusions is to be significantly impacted, it seems reasonable to target the reasons for this contributing factor for change. Is it reasonable to question if a change in school culture is to be successful, should it start in the classroom with classroom teachers?

Paul Dix, speaking at the House of Commons (2010), suggests that due to the hierarchical structure of schools, it is the duty of the school leaders to invoke a strategy to aid the classroom teacher to promote good behaviour in the classroom, with the aim to reduce the number of critical incidents that

could be construed as disruptive behaviour. This responsibility as well as others adds to the workload of the school leaders.

High Workload – Pressures

Paramount to the discussion of psychological health is the understanding that all people have a personalised response to any critical incident depending on the personality traits of that particular person. Szalma (2009), in her investigation into optimism and pessimism relating to workload and stress, noted that “ optimism and pessimism have been found to be associated with differences in performance and stress response” (p. 444). It would be reasonable therefore to suggest that varying levels of optimism and pessimism as a personality trait would lead to varying levels of performance and stress response.

Having set this foundation the relationship between workload and psychological health can be analysed. According to Taylor (1991, p. 223), some of the most common causes of stress are found studying occupational stress. The Health and Safety Executive (H. S. E., 2010, p. 6) estimated that for 2009/10, 435, 000 who were working in the UK over a twelve month period reported illness related to stress, depression or anxiety, that they believed was related to work. That is over 34% of all self-reported work related illnesses for that twelve month period. It is well documented by Taylor (1991, p. 228-9) that stress can increase the likelihood of illness in various ways, including both psychological and physical. More specifically, she provides results from unspecified occupational health studies that state

the sources of stress, such as work overload, work pressure and role conflict (see dilemmas).

The NASA Task Load Index is a global measurement tool for the respective contributions to workload from six categories (see Appendix 1, Figure 8) (NASA TLX; Hart & Staveland, 1988, in Hancock and Meshkati, 1988, p. 241). Warm et al. (2008, in Hancock and Szalma, 2008, p. 119) summarise studies identifying the relative contributions of these sources of workload, results showing that mental demand and frustration being two of the largest contributors to workload, both of these are closely associated to the issue of dilemmas which will be discussed later.

Taylor (1991, p. 227/8) provides possible methods to reduce stress in the workplace. Relating all of these to the issue of permanent exclusion of pupils and the attempt to reduce them, does not appear to hold relevance, for example reducing the physical stressors such as noise and temperature. There are others whose difficulty to implement in the specific situation could render them irrelevant, for example “ involving workers as much as possible in the decisions that affect their work life.” Although discussion is possible with other colleagues regarding permanent exclusions, the final decision is in the hands of the Primary School Leader.

Dilemmas – Pressures

According to UK legislation – Education Act 2002, Subsection 52 (1) – it remains the prerogative of the head teacher of a maintained school to exclude a pupil for a fixed period or permanently. This decision to exclude a pupil – depending upon the particular circumstances – may evoke a dilemma

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for the head teacher. Murphy (2007) provides a definition for dilemma in terms of school leadership.

“ The concept of ‘ dilemma’ does a good job in encapsulating many of the difficult and messy experiential aspects of school leadership. These are situations where a choice has to be made but where, no matter what you choose to do, you appear to go against a key value or leave one of the people or groups involved in the situation aggrieved and unhappy.” (p. 4)

Murphy also explains that dilemmas can cause ‘ intense emotions’ due to the difficult situations that may arise, although he does recognise that head teachers will have varied reactions. (p. 10)

The example of the head teacher charged with permanently excluding a pupil from school exhibited by Hayden (1997) is an example of the intense emotion that dilemmas can cause a school leader when faced with such an issue.

“ I agonised for a whole day before I did it... I know, knowing all of the situation Chris was in, that I was doing exactly the same as everybody else had done to him in school and elsewhere. We wanted him to be happy at school and be with all of us. I felt let down by the support I was getting... It shouldn’t have happened. The poor little devil had been doing so well. I felt so badly... but what alternatives did I have?” (p. xi)

Feelings of desperation explained by the head teacher of Anne Fine Primary School when forced to temporarily exclude a pupil for using violence in front

of other pupils (Cooper et al., 2000, p. 47) supplement the understanding of dilemmas causing intense emotion.

In the table below, included are a summary of the paradoxes of Scottish schooling, as highlighted in Murphy (2007), which relate directly to school exclusion. Although the views presented are in a different context to that being regarded, a clear correlation to the English system can be established.

On the one hand ... but ... on the other hand

Above all, schools should 'care'

Above all, schools should be efficient

Headteachers and staff are held accountable for all aspects of school outcomes

Headteachers and staff have limited responsibility for many of the key determinants of school outcomes

Schools should include all young people in the community

Schools should exclude those whose behaviour poses a threat to the wellbeing of others

Offences against others in the school community are sources of learning and rehabilitation

Offences against others in the school community require punishment

A selection of Table 3. 1 produced by Murphy in collaboration with two head teacher colleagues (p. 27).

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Considering all of the problems mentioned with regard to workload and dilemmas, and the stress that they can cause a school leader, it is understandable that one of the most important skills that a school leader can have in their arsenal is the ability to cope with a high workload and stress. This is a point of view held by Szalma (2009, p. 444), displayed by expressing that “ One skill that may differentiate good performers from poor ones is the capacity to cope with high workload and stress.”

Conclusions

In conclusion it is important to initially address if the intended aims have been met. There have been links displayed and analysed between the government and school leaders, notably the connection made by Hord that the primary school leader is the ‘ intermediary’ between the government and the school. There has also been an analysis of the links between school improvement and school culture based mainly on the research of Angelidis and Ainscow. There was also an attempt to display how an ever increasing workload and the dilemmas that are presented to school leadership directly related to permanent exclusions, impact the psychological health of the head teacher.

It is important to understand that permanent exclusions are an important tool for schools, and the dangers of keeping persistent offenders in school for the sake of reducing their numbers and the external pressures placed upon school leaders. It is also meaningful to question the impact on the learning of the majority of other pupils by keeping persistent offenders in the school.

These are questions that further research could attempt to answer and it is important that such issues are investigated.

There are however contradicting opinions that suggest that school leaders are not fully aware of the problems faced by classroom teachers, and that there is evidence that suggest leadership is detached from the reality of what happens on an everyday basis in the classroom.

In November 2010, the House of Commons Education Committee (2010) invited experts to give evidence on behaviour and discipline in schools. It should be clear that this evidence is taken from an as yet uncorrected transcript and is also not yet approved as a formal record of the proceedings. Birbalsingh notes that it is “ the role of leaders in schools to ensure that all teachers can discipline their students. That doesn’t mean taking responsibility away from the member of staff, but there is a real lack of responsibility in our schools. The children and teachers are not responsible for themselves, and it’s the same with senior teams.” Christodolou in the main agrees with the understanding of the chairperson who comes to the conclusion that “ leadership teams in schools tend to be slightly removed from the reality of front-line teachers who have to put up with behaviour.”

Dix on the other hand defends the work done with future leaders in the field of behaviour: “ We work with future leaders, head teachers and middle management teams to create the conditions where the training will have most effect. That is what we do. It’s proven. HMI and Ofsted have seen it and commended it.”

Hord (1987b in Eskil Stegö et al., 1987) highlights the importance to society of academic issues and how school improvement has an important role to play. She summarises that “ In the USA and other OECD countries, both parent groups and legislators point with dismay to the continuing decline in student achievement test scores, and the increasing numbers of both student drop-outs and others who complete their schooling yet still lack the requisite skills to find employment. These problems constitute yet another source of pressure on the schools, and amplify demands for school improvement.” (p. 29)

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Appendices