

School exclusion after COVID-19: Background information on the participants and the methodology adopted in the virtual sessions and the subsequent policy conversations

Excluded Lives¹ 2020

When in March 2020 schools were closed as part of the COVID-19 restrictions, the Excluded Lives Research Team were planning surveys of students, caregivers and practitioners about their experiences and understanding of school exclusion. Without access to schools this could not happen and as the period of closure lengthened the team realised that COVID-19 was itself likely to significantly impact children and young people's perceptions of school and their relationship with education, which in turn could bring new exclusion risks.

In order to understand the potential impact of COVID-19 on school exclusion, members of the Excluded Lives Research Team convened virtual sessions with 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 existed or could be developed to support practitioners (including implications for integrated, cross-professional working) as well as children and families.

Invitations to take part in the virtual sessions were initially sent to contacts known to members of the Research Team, and many of these participants suggested other people to contact who would be able to provide feedback on what was happening to children, young people and their families and how schools, local services and national policy were responding. An open invitation was then posted on the Excluded Lives Twitter Account [@ExcludedLives](#) and promoted by the National Children's Bureau, who distributed information about the sessions to their established networks and an informal coalition of children's charities.

Over a six week period members of the Excluded Lives Research Team spoke to 70 people from 26 Local Authorities over 16 virtual sessions and individual meetings and received an additional four written responses. Participants worked in the following sectors: 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. All contributions were anonymised. See Table 1 below for further details.

Prior to the sessions, participants were sent a [short briefing paper](#), which 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?

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

Table 1: Breakdown by organisation/sector/type of the 70 participants who contributed to the first report and the four additional/written comments received.

| Organisations from which the 70 participants were drawn broken down by type | No. organisations from which 70 participants came | Breakdown by discipline (*Where people in different disciplines from one LA were involved they were counted against each discipline for the breakdown of organisations) | Organisations from which 4 additional contributors came | Total no. organisations from which 74 participants/contributors came |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Government departments and bodies | 2 | 2 Health/mental health | | 2 |
| National bodies | 5 | 2 Education/children's services, 1 Justice/policing, 2 others | | 5 |
| Local/regional service organisations and LAs | 22 | 2 Health/mental health, 15 Education/children's services, 4 Social care, 1 Justice/policing (see *) | 2 | 24 |
| Schools/MATs | 22 | 22 Education | | 22 |
| Third sector organisations | 3 | 1 Education/children's services, 1 Social care, 1 Justice/policing | 2 | 5 |
| Others | 4 | 1 Health/mental health, 3 Education/children's services | | 4 |
| <i>Total number of organisations from which participants were drawn</i> | <i>58</i> | <i>5 Health/mental health, 43 Education/children's services, 5 Social care, 3 Justice/policing, 2 others (see *)</i> | <i>4</i> | <i>62</i> |

Permission was sought to record the group sessions and notes were written up following the discussions. The information collected was used to produce a series of vignettes to illustrate the potential risks of school exclusion following COVID-19. These vignettes² along with additional themes discussed in the virtual sessions formed the basis of the final report: [School Exclusion Risks after COVID-19](#). A draft of the report was sent out to participants and to the Excluded Lives' Knowledge Exchange Panelⁱ for comment and feedback and a number of additional references and insights were added at that stage. The final report was published in June 2020.

What rapidly became evident from the report were the associated policy implications that emerged alongside implications for practice. To explore the policy implications further the Excluded Lives Research Team decided to host a series of virtual 'Policy Conversations.' Between July and early September 2020 team members spoke with 28 policy makers, sector bodies, third sector representatives and practitioners from England as well as an additional eight policy makers from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Participants were identified through the project's Knowledge

² An additional vignette was subsequently created for the Excluded Lives Research Team by the bereavement charity Winston's Wish, which focuses on experiences of bereavement during the pandemic. The vignette can be found [here](#).

Exchange Panel, contacts from the first series of virtual sessions, and a search of reports published around schooling during COVID-19.

Table 2 provides an overview of the types of organisations the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants represented. For some organisations, more than one representative participated in the ‘Policy Conversations.’ The names of the participants and their organisations are not included in order to maintain anonymity.

Table 2: Breakdown by organisation/sector/type of the 36 participants involved in the Policy Conversations

| Organisations from which the 36 participants were drawn broken down by type | No. of organisations | Organisations from which the 36 participants were drawn broken down by jurisdiction |
|---|----------------------|---|
| Government departments and bodies (including health and education) | 8 | 4 England, 2 Scotland, 1 Northern Ireland, 1 Wales |
| National bodies | 3 | 2 England, 1 Wales |
| Local/regional service organisations and LAs | 4 | 2 England, 2 Northern Ireland |
| Schools/MATs | 1 | 1 England |
| Third sector organisations | 10 | 8 UK wide, 1 England, 1 England/Wales (7 Education, 2 Social care, 1 other) |
| Others | 2 | 2 England |
| <i>Total number of organisations from which participants were drawn</i> | <i>28</i> | <i>8 UK, 12 England, 1 England/Wales, 2 Wales, 2 Scotland, 3 Northern Ireland</i> |

The ‘Policy Conversations’ took as their starting point the vignettes included in the original report, which depicted children and young people who were deemed to be at risk of formal (permanent and fixed-period³), informal or self-exclusion due to the effects of the pandemic. Participants were sent a [short paper](#) summarising the policy issues emerging from the first report and asked the following three questions:

1. What policy changes need to be introduced to prevent a possible increase in school exclusion post COVID-19?
2. What do you see as the barriers and enablers to implementing the policy changes we have proposed in our report?
3. Are you aware of other factors and/or policy changes that we have not picked up on which may affect school exclusion post COVID-19?

Again, permission was sought to record the group sessions and notes were written up following the discussions. The information was thematically coded, independently, by three members of the Research Team, and the codes were discussed and refined through a series of team meetings. A supplementary review of the COVID-19 school recovery/reopening guidance for each of the four UK jurisdictions was also completed by a member of the Research Team. The findings are drawn together in the report: [Seeking a balance: Conversations with policy makers and influencers about intervening upstream to prevent school exclusions in the context of Covid-19 and beyond](#). A draft of the report was shared with participants for comment and feedback before publication.

Discussions were held with eleven other people drawn from across policy makers, schools, Multi-Academy Trusts and local services about proposed policy recommendations, which were then published in two additional reports. The first short document, [Getting the balance right: Policy](#)

³ For definitions of permanent and fixed-period exclusions see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion>

[recommendations for intervening upstream to prevent school exclusion in the context of Covid-19](#) sets out our key policy recommendations. The second slightly longer report, [Restoring the balance: Policy recommendation justifications for collective responsibility in the post Covid-19 era](#) expands on these recommendations and provides the evidence base with reference to other literature. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the organisations involved in these informal discussions and notes the total number of organisations who informed the three policy reports (*Getting the balance right, Restoring the balance and Seeking a balance*).

Table 3: Breakdown by organisation/sector/type of the eleven follow-up discussion participants and total numbers of organisations from which contributors to the three policy reports were drawn

| Organisations from which the 11 follow up discussion participants were drawn broken down by type | No. of organisations | No. organisations from which the 36 participants were drawn (details in Table 2) | Total no. organisations from which 47 participants were drawn |
|--|----------------------|--|---|
| Government departments and bodies (including health and education) | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| National bodies | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Local/regional service organisations and LAs | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Schools/MATs | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Third sector organisations | 5 | 10 | 15 |
| Others | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| <i>Total number of organisations</i> | 11 | 28 | 39 |

For more information about any aspects of the work please contact the Excluded Lives Research Team at excludedlives@education.ox.ac.uk

ⁱ The **Knowledge Exchange Panel** was initially drawn from key agencies, voluntary and third sector organisations across the UK who we worked with in the development of the project. Since then others have joined where a shared interest in exclusion has been identified. The purpose of the **Knowledge Exchange Panel** is to maximise the co-production and impact of the project by:

- being kept informed by Excluded Lives about the research, including emerging findings and issues
- directing us to other research and activity in the field
- helping to link Excluded Lives to policy and practice including legislative reform and government reviews

and as appropriate:

- engaging with and disseminating research findings to families and schools
- supporting dissemination in the four UK jurisdictions

The **Knowledge Exchange Panel** is kept in contact with the project through regular research updates and report cards with invitations to lectures and events to all organisations which are on the Panel. We follow up on specific emerging issues with individual organisations or subgroups as relevant (within and/or across the four jurisdictions of the UK) to make effective use of their expertise.

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