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# Exclusion from school in Scotland and across the UK: Contrasts and questions

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This article draws on findings from the first cross-national study of school exclusion in the four jurisdictions of the UK. It casts new light on the crucial aspects of children's education that lead to school exclusion. It investigates the reasons for the UK disparities, as well as the policy and practice in place. The focus of this article is on a detailed analysis of the policy context in Scotland, where official permanent exclusion reduced to an all-time low of just five cases in 2014/15. This is much lower than in Northern Ireland and Wales and in stark contrast to England, where exclusions have increased substantially since 2012. Our analysis seeks to understand Scotland's success in reducing exclusion and offers new insight into the ways in which national policies and local factors more generally shape schools and their practices and the consequent impacts for children and young people more broadly in the UK.

**Keywords:** behaviour; disadvantage; educational policy; school exclusion/exclusion

## Introduction: Exclusion from school in the UK

There are considerable disparities in rates of exclusion (also known as expulsion and suspension) from school across the four jurisdictions of the UK. 97.4% of all children permanently excluded in the UK in 2016/17 were from schools in England. This is a striking figure, although there are over five times the number of school children in England than in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. Past research has shown that permanent disciplinary exclusion often has many negative long-term consequences for all aspects of young people's lives (e.g. Daniels *et al.*, 2003; Parsons, 2009; Scottish Government, 2017, pp. 16–17). However, little is known about the reasons why the four UK jurisdictions differ so greatly in their official accounts of practices of exclusion, or whether there are informal practices associated with these disparities.

The study on which this article draws is seen as a significant preliminary step towards a detailed and comprehensive project.<sup>1</sup> The design for the research was developed collaboratively by a research group (RG) based across the universities of Cardiff, Edinburgh, Oxford and Queen's, Belfast. This RG is part of the larger, interdisciplinary 'Excluded Lives' group led by Oxford University, which brings together

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expertise in law, psychiatry, criminology, disability studies, sociology, human geography, economics and education.

The RG seeks to increase understanding of the ways in which the ‘hardest to reach’ children and youth become excluded from the benefits that society has to offer, and, on the basis of these understandings, to formulate policy recommendations to reduce the likelihood of what Levitas *et al.* (2007) term ‘deep exclusion’. Such exclusion operates across more than one domain of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances in relation to, for example, health, involvement with the justice system, employment and housing (Levitas *et al.*, 2007; Keung, 2010; Gill *et al.*, 2017; OECD, 2019). The RG adopts a broad view of school exclusion, encompassing those children and young people who are excluded legally and illegally. Illegal exclusions involve ‘off-the-record’, informal or ‘under-the-radar’ exclusions. It is committed to the development of a critical, fresh perspective that emphasises the penalty so often placed by school exclusion on the lives of children and young people, frequently leading to their profound isolation from mainstream society.

The aims of this study were:

- To develop and trial a model of the practices and outcomes of exclusion in each of the four nations that could be used to elicit key stakeholder perspectives.
- To elicit and analyse the perspectives of key stakeholders in each of the four nation states on the practices of official and informal exclusion from school.
- To assist the development of a theoretical account of the mutual shaping of policy and practice in the field of school exclusion.

### *The focus of this article*

This article offers the first analysis of policy and political frameworks for school exclusion in Scotland, setting this within the context of findings from this preliminary study in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scotland’s rates of permanent exclusion have been consistently lower than elsewhere in the UK, and in 2014/15 reached a historic low with only five students ‘removed from the register’ (permanently excluded) from school. The most recent data (Scottish Government, 2018) indicate that this low rate has been maintained, with only five students again officially ‘removed from the register’ in 2016/17. Rates for temporary school exclusions are also lower in Scotland than in Wales and England, and continue on a downward trajectory.

The aim of this article, therefore, is to shed light on the specific context of one country, Scotland, but also to reflect that light back on to the other UK nations; to report and analyse the Scottish data, but also to surface potential explanatory factors for the continuing disparities in exclusion rates across the UK, and the marked contrast between school exclusion rates in England and Scotland in particular. The results of this analysis offer significant new insight into the ways in which national policies and local factors shape schools and their practices, and the consequent impacts for children and young people more broadly. It also casts some light on

‘unofficial’ or ‘illegal’ school exclusions, and perhaps why exclusion rates in England are rising.

The research received ethical approval through the University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee in April 2017, and also through each of the partner institutions in the RG: Queen’s University, Belfast; University of Edinburgh; and Cardiff University.

### **Design, data sources and methodology**

The design included: (a) analysis of national datasets on permanent and fixed-term exclusions in the four jurisdictions of the UK; (b) documentary analysis of relevant legislation and national policy guidance; and (c) semi-structured interviews. The questions for interview were derived from key themes identified in a two-day roundtable interdisciplinary RG workshop, which also drew directly on the expertise of practitioners.

The interviews, guided by the same schedule of questions, were undertaken with 27 key stakeholders<sup>2</sup> at sites in a northern English local authority (LA), a southern English LA in London, a large city in Scotland, a large city in Wales and in Northern Ireland. Interviewees included senior policy-makers and local authority officers concerned with education (overall), exclusion/inclusion, child and adolescent mental health, additional and/or alternative provision, special and/or additional needs and disabilities, and NEET (students ‘not in education, employment or training’) status; also senior officers, including three lawyers and a senior social worker, working for third-sector organisations concerned with marginalised and disadvantaged children and youth. Some of these key stakeholders were identified through the existing knowledge and relationships RG members had in each of the four jurisdictions. A Deputy Director of Children’s Services helped to facilitate the interviews with key stakeholders in a northern English LA.

Interviews (other than those in Northern Ireland)<sup>3</sup> were conducted by two members of the RG, with the same highly experienced senior researcher (one of the present writers) leading all of the interviews. The second interviewer was a member of the RG based in the relevant jurisdiction and who, in Scotland and Wales, had negotiated access and consents. This approach sought to ensure a rigour and consistency across the fieldwork, combined with the advantages of ‘local’ knowledge of political and policy contexts.

Six of the stakeholder interviewees were based in Scotland. Two worked at senior level for the central civil service (SGO1, SGO2) and were interviewed together. A third interviewee (SGO3) was a senior education official in a national government agency and was interviewed individually. All three had worked as teachers earlier in their careers. Two senior local government officers (SLAO1, SLAO2) were also interviewed, separately. Both of these had a background in educational psychology. The final interviewee (STSO1) worked in the third sector and was a highly experienced officer with longstanding national and local responsibilities and a professional social work background.

The interviews were all audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcriptions of these interviews, supplemented by field notes, formed the basis of

this dataset. Each interview began with a brief introductory presentation of the official data on school exclusions from the four jurisdictions over the previous 5 years. Much of this data is reproduced below in the ‘Findings: Scottish exclusion statistics in context’ section. This introduction was used to initiate detailed discussions with the stakeholders, lasting between 50 minutes and an hour and a half.

Following the fieldwork, the data from the recorded interviews were collated by one of the present writers (Cole, 2018) and further analysed by the interdisciplinary RG in a large workshop in Oxford in order to establish potential patterns of exclusion affected by policy decisions as well as cultural and historical factors. The same analytical process was applied to data from each of the four jurisdictions. The team also examined the documentary evidence on exclusions from each of the four nations. The RG then used these different disciplinary perspectives to start to develop hypotheses and examine the underlying possible reasons behind legal exclusions and any identified illegal exclusion practices.

### **Findings: Scottish exclusion statistics in context**

While the numbers of permanent exclusions in England and Wales in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools are rising and are the subject of increasing public and political concern, national data in Scotland indicate that exclusions involving ‘removal from the register’ (i.e. permanent exclusions) have been almost eliminated; down to five single cases in 2014/15 and then maintained at that level again in 2016/17. In Northern Ireland there were few permanent exclusions (called ‘expulsions’): 29 in 2013/14 and 33 in 2016/17. In Wales, 89 pupils were permanently excluded in 2013/14 and 2014/15, but this increased to 109 in 2015/16 and 165 in 2016/17. In England, permanent exclusions rose substantially from 4,950 in 2013/14 to 5,795 in 2014/15 and to 7,720 in 2016/17 (DENI, 2012–2015; DfE, 2015, 2018; Scottish Government, 2018; Welsh Government, 2018).

These figures are set in a wider 7-year context in Figure 1, a time period that permits the inclusion of four sets of biennial figures for Scotland which (unlike England, Wales and Northern Ireland) does not publish figures annually. Each part of the UK adopts slightly different ways of presenting exclusion figures. The government in England’s approach is adopted here and allows comparability across each of the four jurisdictions: figures are expressed as a percentage of the total state-funded primary, secondary and special school population (see Cole, 2019 for detailed information on the methodology).

The triangles between 0 and 0.02% in Figure 1 show that the number of pupils ‘removed from the register’ of their school in Scotland, already low, has decreased since 2010/11. In Northern Ireland, numbers have remained low and fairly static (under or just over 0.01% each year). In Wales, after 4 years of stability at 0.02%, the exclusion rate increased to 0.04% in 2016/17. England’s much higher rate of exclusion climbed from 0.06% in 2012/13 and 2013/14 to 0.10% in 2016/17. Exclusions in England have now overtaken the rate in 2010/11, but are still much lower than the 0.16% (12,300 permanent exclusions) reached in 1997/98 (Cole, 2015).

An examination of other forms of officially recorded exclusions also reveals differing rates across the UK. Scotland does not have a system of fixed-period exclusions as

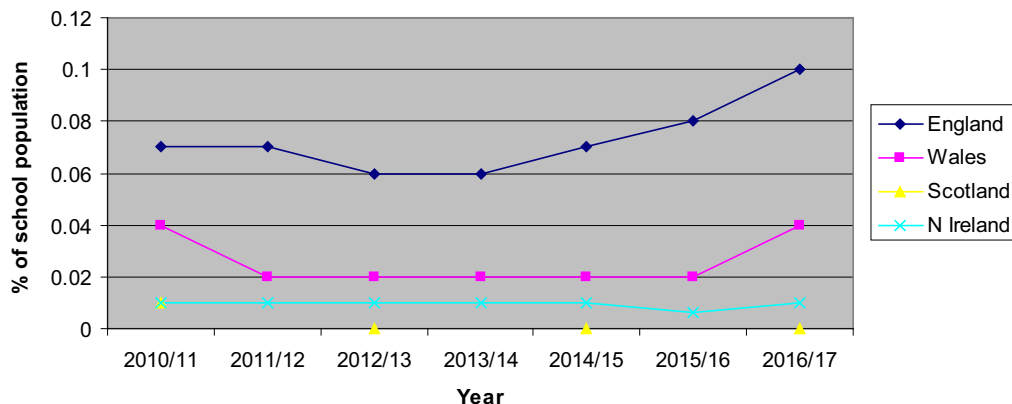


Figure 1. Permanent exclusions across the UK as a percentage of the school population of state-funded primary, secondary and special schools<sup>4</sup>

Sources: DfE (2015, table 1; 2018, table 1); Scottish Government (2018); Welsh Government (2015, table 1; 2017, table 1; 2018, table 1); DENI (2012–2015, 2017, pupil suspension and expulsion statistics). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

in England, but has a near equivalent in ‘temporary exclusion’. In this article we avoid use of the term ‘temporary’ and indeed of the terms ‘fixed period’ (the English descriptor), ‘fixed term’ (the Welsh descriptor) and ‘suspension’ (the Northern Irish descriptor). Each term is associated with a slightly different definition, but each descriptor refers to the same response of schools and local authorities to pupils’ challenging behaviour (i.e. denying a learner access to his or her school for a period of time). Each term gives rise to sets of official statistics that, employed with caution (see Cole, 2019), can allow useful UK-wide comparisons. One descriptor, ‘non-permanent exclusions’ (NPEs), is adopted here to encompass the terms given above. It refers to any official, recorded exclusion other than permanent exclusion.

Care has been taken to ensure that the figures used in Figure 3 are comparing ‘like with like’. Recording and publicising the *total number* of NPEs is the approach used in England, Scotland and Wales. This means that the numbers of exclusions experienced by all children in a year are counted and then the totals are expressed either as a percentage of the total population of state-funded primary, secondary and special schools (the English way) or as a rate per thousand pupils in the same educational sectors (the Scottish and Welsh way). If one child is excluded more than once, as often happens, then each instance of exclusion is included in the national total and contributes to the resulting ‘exclusion rate’. In contrast Northern Ireland, in its published documents, highlights the *total number of pupils* experiencing one or more NPEs in a year. However, in certain Northern Irish tables the *total number of NPEs* is given. We have taken the latter figures to allow comparisons of exclusion rates across the four jurisdictions. In Figure 3 the Welsh and Scottish exclusion rates per thousand have been changed into percentages.

We are aware of caveats about making comparisons within and between countries given in the notes accompanying the published statistics (e.g. Welsh Government, 2018). These warnings draw attention to alterations in data collection methods. However, the alterations have a relatively minor impact on each jurisdiction’s overall



	2012/13 (% of school population)	2016/17 (% of school population)
England	267,520 (3.51)	381,865 (4.76)
Wales	13,879 (3.00)	16,907 (3.67)
Scotland	21,934 (3.27)	18,376 (2.68)
N Ireland	5,772 (1.81)	6,805 (2.14)

Figure 2. Total numbers of instances of recorded non-permanent exclusions<sup>5</sup>  
Sources: DfE (2018, table 1); Scottish Government (2018, table 8.1); Welsh Government (2017, 2018); DENI (2014).

figures and do not negate trends. In short, we are confident that Figures 2 and 3 give a useful and valid comparison of practice as recorded in official government figures.

The rates for NPEs witness fewer extreme disparities than the statistics on ‘removal from the register’/permanent exclusion. Figure 2 presents the numbers of NPEs for 2012/13, the year in which the figures for England, Northern Ireland and Wales reached or were close to their lowest levels this century; and for 2016/17 (the most recent set of comparable figures).

If evidence from the key stakeholder interviews is taken into account (see the ‘Dissonance between policy and practice’ section below), these figures are less likely to paint an accurate picture of actual practice than the statistics for permanent exclusions. However, the figures do indicate a clear downward trend in the Scottish figures, from about 4% (almost as high as in England in 2010/11) to a current rate<sup>5</sup> of under 3%. They also indicate distinct movement upwards for England and some increase in Wales since 2012/13. Figure 3 sets the Figure 2 entries in a wider context, showing the number of NPEs expressed as a percentage of the total population of school

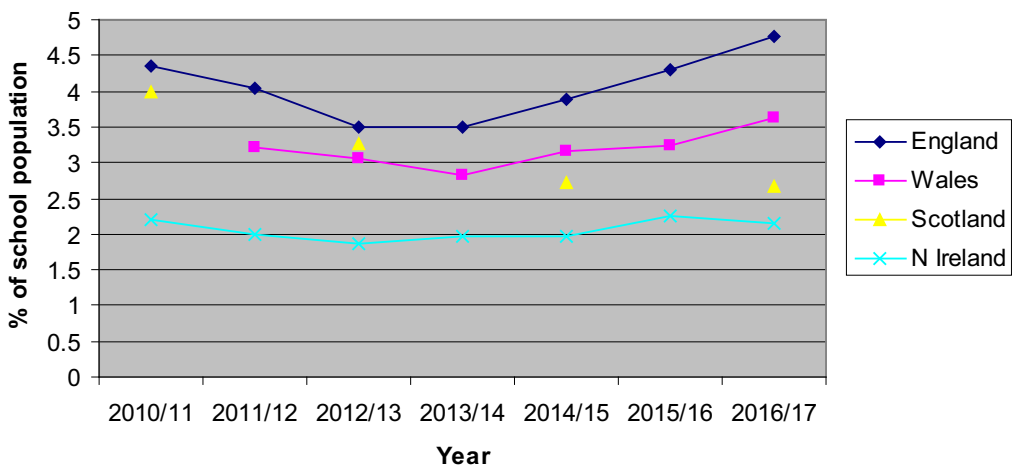


Figure 3. Non-permanent exclusions across the UK as a percentage of the school population of state-funded primary,<sup>6</sup> secondary and special schools<sup>7</sup>

Sources: DfE (2015, table 2; 2018, table 1); Scottish Government (2018); Welsh Government (2017, table 1; 2018, table 1); DENI (2012–2015, 2017, pupil suspension and exclusion tables); school population figures from DENI (2014, table 2; 2016, table 2). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

	Excluded on one occasion only	10 or more fixed-period exclusions in one year	Average length of non-permanent exclusion	Lasting more than one week
England	59.1%	1.5%	2.1 days	2.0%
Scotland	66.0%	0.1%	3 days	0.4%

Figure 4. Duration of non-permanent exclusions in England and Scotland  
Sources: DfE (2018); Scottish Government (2018).

children in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools on a chosen census day for the years 2010/11–2016/17.

These figures offer an important point of comparison across the UK, raising questions about how such disparities have arisen and are perpetuated. In light of the large body of evidence on the negative impact of adversities faced by some identified groups of vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils (Strand, 2014; OECD, 2016), and the continuing over-representation of many of these same pupils in exclusion figures (DWP, 2012; Gazeley *et al.*, 2013; McCluskey *et al.*, 2016), we were also concerned to understand whether and how this varied across the UK and ways in which this gives insight into national policies and impacts for children and young people. One such point of comparison lies in the duration of the exclusion. Figure 4 illustrates a comparison between England and Scotland on the duration of exclusions. The average duration of a non-permanent exclusion in Scotland was 3 days in 2016/17 (Scottish Government, 2018). In England such exclusions were slightly shorter on average, but the proportion of longer exclusions was also substantially higher (DfE, 2018).

Gazeley *et al.* (2013) found that, for some children and young people, the longer the exclusion, the more difficult it was to achieve successful reintegration and a positive destination after leaving school, a point also stressed in Welsh Government (2015: 6.9.1). This is important because of the growing evidence that the strongest link between disadvantage and poor outcomes relates to how long an individual has lived with disadvantage (Gorard, 2016).

All four nations collate and publish statistical data on instances of exclusion and the number of pupils involved, with analysis on the basis, for example, of gender, type of exclusion, additional or special needs and educational stage of pupil excluded, but beyond that Northern Ireland publishes very limited data. It does not, for example, publish data allowing analysis of the intersection of socio-economic status and exclusion, or disability and exclusion. In our view, this obscures the relationship between the local decision of a school to exclude an individual pupil and the macro-level disproportionalities which consistently feature in national patterns and trends. A further difficulty in making comparisons arises because Scotland, unlike England and Wales, does not have a National Pupil Database so does not collect data on individual pupils in such a way as to make it possible to track the relationship between an individual, identified pupil and experience(s) of school exclusion. This means, for example, that we cannot establish from the data available whether the five pupils who were removed from the school register in 2016/17 had been excluded previously, and if so at what stage of their education, or whether any previous exclusions were temporary or involved removal from the register. Notwithstanding these difficulties in comparative



analysis, the data indicate the overall disparities across the UK. They clearly suggest the strong and distinctive position of Scotland as a low-excluding country, although the data do not and cannot, as for the other UK jurisdictions, capture or compare the full extent or nature of unofficial exclusionary practices.

In the following section, we review school exclusion processes and school exclusion policy in Scotland, again within the wider UK context. From there, the analysis moves on to discuss data from interviews with key stakeholders. The key themes and questions that emerge from this data are compared to patterns and trends elsewhere in the UK.

### **Findings: National guidance and policy**

Given the known negative short- and long-term impacts of school exclusion on many children, it is necessary to consider the role of policy frameworks in shaping school processes and decisions. The national guidance in Scotland on school exclusions is called *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2: A positive approach to preventing and managing school exclusions* (Scottish Government, 2017).<sup>8</sup> This guidance revised and updated an earlier version issued in 2011. Both the new and older versions incorporate and overlap with materials contained in another key policy document: *Better relationships, better behaviour, better learning* (Scottish Government, 2013), but the most recent iteration is much more explicit throughout about the links between exclusion and lifewide, lifelong disadvantage. *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2* (IEI 2) is a policy whose existence has coincided with a dramatic reduction in exclusions from Scottish schools. The guidance aligns with a national, long-term strategy on prevention and early intervention aimed at helping school staff to build positive relationships with children and young people at risk of exclusion. This strategy is promoted from a high level in Scottish Government. In the 2017 Foreword to IEI 2, the Deputy First Minister and Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney, attributes the marked decline in exclusions over time to:

... the continued focus by schools and education authorities to build on and improve their relationship with our children and young people most at risk of exclusion in their learning communities. That relationship is at the heart of every story of success. (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 3)

IEI 2 sets an expectation that LAs and schools will take a fresh look at their practice, focusing on 'social and emotional wellbeing and an ethos of mutual respect and trust, in order to promote inclusion and a whole school ethos based on positive relationships and behaviour' (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 8). The guidance goes on to state that:

The overall drop in school exclusions reflects the focus schools and education authorities have placed on developing a whole school ethos; promoting inclusion; and developing positive relationships and behaviour. It also reflects the commitment of staff, as well as the use of staged intervention and approaches to keeping children and young people included, engaged and involved in their education. (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 10)

It is interesting to note both the title of the guidance and the word order in IEI 2's subtitle. As one interviewee noted, the tone is set by the emphasis on 'inclusion' and

‘engagement’ ahead of exclusion, and on ‘preventing’ ahead of ‘managing’ exclusions. Only in the last quarter of this document does IEI 2 focus on the specific procedures and management of exclusions, before returning in Annex B to ‘approaches to improving positive relationships and behaviour’. The guidance consistently calls for the use of exclusion only as a last resort, stating, for example:

The overarching aim of this guidance is to support schools, communities and their partners to keep all children and young people **fully included, engaged and involved** in their education; and, to improve outcomes for all Scotland’s children and young people with a particular focus on those who are at risk of exclusion. (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 7; bold emphasis added)

Only after this does IEI 2 refer to ‘the need for all members of a learning community to be safe and feel protected’ (p. 7), thereby allowing for a justifiable need for exclusion.

Throughout IEI 2, attention is drawn to the need to consider the likely impact of exclusion on a child’s life chances, especially for children already facing disadvantage; for example, where assessed or declared as having a disability or an additional support need (ASN), ‘looked after’, living with deprivation or identified as having ASN related to social, emotional and behavioural factors (e.g. p. 10, p. 16, p. 17, p. 22, p. 29). This emphasis on the impacts of exclusion is further supported by reference to evidence from the triennial national survey undertaken by the Scottish Government on behaviour in Scottish schools (Scottish Government, 2016), noting that this research has consistently shown the benefits for inclusion, engagement, attainment and achievement of investment of time and resources in improving relationships and behaviour. Again, the word order in IEI 2 may be seen as significant here, with ‘relationships’ preceding the word ‘behaviour’ each time.

This exclusions guidance also outlines factors which improve relationships in schools, including the importance of building and sustaining a positive ‘prevention ethos’, good leadership and partnership with parents. It specifies approaches which schools may use to improve relationships, including restorative practices (McCluskey, 2018), solution-oriented approaches, whole-school nurturing approaches, anti-bullying policies and effective learning and teaching itself. Alongside these approaches there is support for ‘hosting’ (often known as ‘managed moves’ in England and Wales), where young people experiencing difficulties in one school are supported to move to another local school, flexibility in the curriculum and use of ‘individualised, planned packages of support’ (p. 25). Links are also made here to initiatives such as the national Mentors in Violence Prevention programme (p. 50), which supports young people in tackling gender-based violence and bullying. The connections between policy and practice are made throughout, with regular references to the work of the national government agency for education, Education Scotland, which supports policy implementation and engagement in local authorities and schools through its programme of training, seminars and communication.

It is when IEI 2 moves on to set out expectations about ‘facing up to the most challenging situations’ (p. 12) that the proactive, preventative emphasis is perhaps most clearly distinct from current exclusion policy in England. A section entitled ‘De-escalation and physical intervention’ begins, not as might be expected, by outlining a

range of techniques for intervention, but by framing the practical guidelines as follows:

There are times when children and young people will exhibit challenging and distressed behaviour. Staff's knowledge and detailed assessment of a child or young person should be used to predict and plan for the type of situation which may cause that child or young person severe stress or frustration that can lead to challenging and distressed behaviour. Staff should recognise that all behaviour is communication and endeavour to identify, where possible, the triggers that may lead to a child or young person acting in a challenging and distressed way. (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 22)

Current equivalent policy advice for schools in England (DfE, 2016, 2017) is much more punitive in tone and while its *Advice for head teachers* (DfE, 2016) states that schools should reinforce good behaviour with use of praise and rewards, there is no discussion of the value or effectiveness of alternatives to exclusion—such as restorative practices. In contrast to guidance from a decade earlier, when English exclusions were on a downward trend (DfES, 2007; Cole, 2015), much of this current advice document is given over to descriptions of punishments, advice on powers to search without consent, power to use 'reasonable force' and use of isolation and seclusion. The statutory guidance (DfE, 2017) focuses closely on legal duties of head teachers and governors and independent review panels. In Wales, the equivalent guidance (Welsh Government, 2015) begins by setting out the legal framework, factors to consider in a decision to exclude and drug-related exclusions. However, in contrast to the English policy, it then exhorts school staff to consider a range of factors in reaching a decision to exclude—for example, that an 'appropriate investigation has been carried out' (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 9), that there is evidence supporting the allegations made and that the young person is allowed to give their 'version of events'. The range of factors to be considered does not include the socio-economic impacts of exclusion as in the Scottish guidance, but there is a helpfully detailed and extensive section on alternatives to exclusion, including restorative approaches.

The Scottish guidance (and Welsh Government, 2015) advocates early intervention, stressing that it is 'crucial in reducing the need for exclusion' (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 20). It outlines a model of staged intervention and inter-agency working—often referred to as joined-up partnership work in the Scottish policy context—arguably given more impetus by the emphasis on prevention which permeates the guidance overall (see Figure 5):

Staged intervention models should include a range of approaches from universal through to more targeted and specialist support that are adapted across local authorities in accordance with local context and needs. (p. 20)

Thus, an emphasis on understanding the precursors of challenging behaviour, and a reminder that all behaviour is communication, effectively frame the statement that then follows: 'risk must always be an important consideration and should inform a school's decision whether or not to exclude a child or young person' (p. 22).

In summary, the guidance on school exclusion in Scotland (as was more the case in England a decade ago—see Cole, 2015) seems to be predicated on principles of prevention, positive ethos building and staged intervention; setting an expectation that

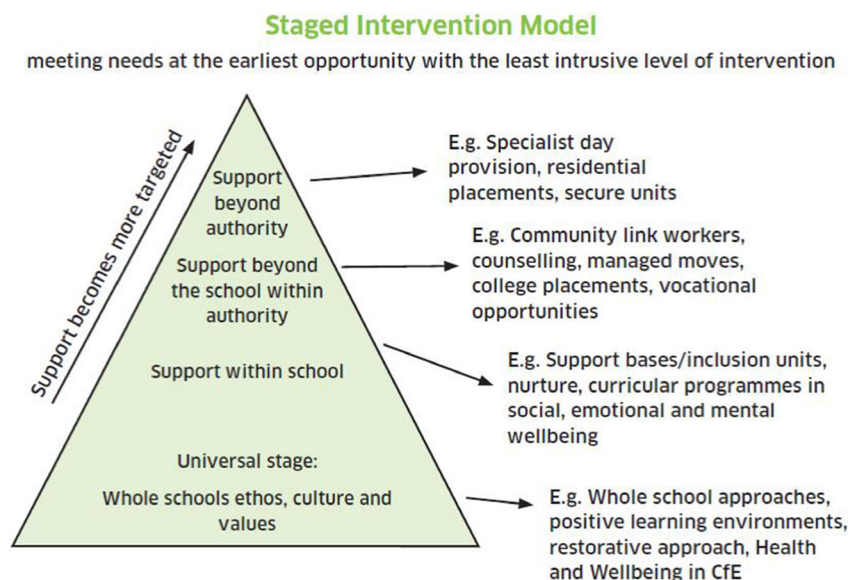


Figure 5. Staged intervention model used in Scotland and Wales

Source: Scottish Government (2013). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

schools will approach challenging behaviour within a contextualised understanding of the impacts of discrimination and disadvantage, and the need to build and sustain positive relationships. It is not within the scope of this article to offer detailed comparison of all relevant policy guidance in the UK; a more detailed examination of the evolving policy contexts is offered in Cole *et al.* (2019). However, this brief review suggests that Scottish guidance remains closer to that of Wales, but has diverged sharply from England's in recent years in that the Scottish advice is explicitly and deliberately concerned with supporting schools in preventing exclusion and mitigating its most harmful long-term effects.

It should be noted that Northern Ireland does not possess a document that can be compared to DfE (2017), Scottish Government (2017) or Welsh Government (2015). Other publications do, however, offer guidance on positive behaviour management for those excluded or at risk of exclusion (e.g. DENI, 1998, 2014; Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 2014).

We now turn from this review of exclusion statistics and policy frameworks in context, to analysis of the stakeholder interviews.

### Findings: Interviews with key stakeholders

The semi-structured interviews had three foci:

- What do the exclusions data tell you about your own policy and practice context and those of the other UK nations/jurisdictions?

- What do the data *not* tell you about your own policy and practice context and those of others, specifically with respect to unofficial or illegal routes to exclusion?
- What concerns do you have about policy and practice with respect to exclusion from school?

The key themes which emerged from analysis of the Scottish interviews related to reflections on: the *primacy of ethos and prevention*; the role of *co-design and communication*; the recognition of the *complexity of the lives of some young people*; and a degree of *dissonance between official policy and actual practice*. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

*An ethos of prevention*: ‘permanent exclusion, to us . . . just doesn’t really feature’

Each of these interviewees explicitly and strongly supported the move away from use of permanent exclusions. As one said: ‘*permanent exclusion, to us . . . just doesn’t really feature in our vocabulary*’ (SGO3, p. 17),<sup>9</sup> later noting that: ‘*the trend is towards keeping children in school, in a positive way, rather than excluding them*’ (SGO3, p. 29). Another interviewee made a similar comment in relation to unofficial exclusion: ‘*There is a very, very strong and clear, consistent message around that, there’s a sort of zero tolerance of any unofficial exclusion*’ (SGO3, p. 37) and yet another noted: ‘*we are committed to inclusive practice, keeping kids and schools. We very much believe that schools are protective, exclusions detrimental in terms of outcomes. . . They are all our kids*’ (SLAO2, p. 54). Reference was made to the most recent national survey of behaviour in schools (Scottish Government, 2016). The interviewees noted that this survey provided evidence on which they could call to show that the anti-exclusion strategy had not led to increases in disruptive, challenging behaviour. The participants talked about a range of different elements that contributed at different levels in the education system to reducing school exclusions.

Scotland’s national ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ can allow for a flexible approach to teaching, potentially permitting the better matching of learning experiences to pupil preferences. Funding systems were not seen, in contrast to England in 2018, as a barrier to putting tailored support packages in place. One interviewee discussed changes to school inspection, resulting in a new core quality indicator called ‘Ensuring equality, wellbeing and inclusion’, one of three indicators given parity of esteem with the school’s attainment levels and grades for teaching and learning. The links to policy messages about raising attainment were also repeatedly noted by those we interviewed, with one saying: ‘*the best place for young people is within their own school*’ (SGO3, p. 25) and later adding: ‘*I do talk quite candidly; if you can’t get your children in and you don’t keep them in, you’re not going to raise attainment*’ (SGO3, p. 26).

Complexities associated with ‘internal exclusion’, which can help to avoid NPEs, were discussed by some. SLAO1 welcomed the development of ‘behaviour bases’ in most of the LA’s high schools. This was echoed by the appreciation of this approach in Wales, by a senior LA interviewee there. It was clear to us that there were different views about the use of internal exclusion and how it is effected, with one interviewee suggesting that: ‘*If your outcome measures are that they are safe, and in school, and they’re not going back to vulnerable household situations, then I think they’re being very successful*’ (SLAO2, p. 51).



*Co-design and collaboration: A 'clear line of sight' between policy and practice*

The senior civil servants both spoke with conviction about the importance and prominence of the co-creation and co-design of policy-making which involves all stakeholders (school leaders, psychological services, parents leaders, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, teachers' unions), resulting in a high degree of consensus and support. They talked about an approach based on '*partnership*', in which '*we all get round a table*'. . . and a '*clear line of sight in a big national policy development because of the size and scale of the country*' (SGO1, p. 19) so that major underpinning initiatives such as 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC) and the national GIRFEC indicators—Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included (often known simply as SHANARRI)—were all referenced in positive ways by all interviewees.

GIRFEC and SHANARRI overlap considerably with the aims and key outcomes stressed by England's 'Every Child Matters' strategy, largely abandoned after the change of government in 2010 (DfES, 2003; Cole, 2015). Similarly, the commitment—continuing in Scotland but diluted in England—to whole-school ethos-building, restorative practice, solution-focused approaches and 'nurture groups/approaches' (see Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007; Mackay *et al.*, 2010) were all seen as helpful and necessary in planning alternatives to exclusion.

This commitment to active inter-agency working or partnership across local authorities, with schools and within schools, was echoed in other interviews, with particular references made, for example, to the close working relationship between COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) and the educational psychology services on efforts to raise the attainment of the country's poorest children. One example cited was the ongoing commitment of the Scottish Government to publish and share the action research being undertaken by educational psychologists across all local authorities. Another was the 'clamping down' (SGO3, p. 32) on part-time timetables in the new exclusions guidance (Scottish Government, 2017). At a more local level, the expectations about the use of data to inform decisions has clearly also had an impact on the work on local authorities and schools, allowing schools to improve their tracking and monitoring so that, for example, they can discern patterns of exclusion, days of the week, departments where issues are more likely to arise and then provide support in those areas.

The Scottish interviewees (in contrast to those in the two English LAs, but not the Welsh LA and the Northern Irish Education Department interviewees) talked about regular communication in advance of a potential exclusion, in line with expectations set out in the national exclusions guidance (Scottish Government, 2017), and were emphatic in saying that schools cannot simply decide to exclude without having an indication of a solution, with one giving an example of a conversation with a head teacher:

Okay so what does your risk management plan say, in terms of why the pupil's needs can't be met in your school? And what does that say about what we as [the local authority] need to do to meet their needs elsewhere? (SLAO2, p. 41)

It was also apparent that this regular communication gave these local authority officers an in-depth understanding of the emotional effects on schools of dealing with



difficulty, from a classroom teacher facing a child displaying challenging behaviour to a head teacher in distress about a decision to exclude.

It was felt that the closeness of the links between local authorities and schools (again in contrast with the English experience reported by interviewees there), the ‘one service approach’ or ‘golden thread’ (SLAO2, p. 44), was effective in a number of ways; for example, in preventing children from going missing from education in high numbers (SGO2, p. 37), an issue currently causing concern in England. Similarly, elective home education following a recorded exclusion or as a means of avoiding formal exclusion was not seen as a major issue, in contrast to both England and Wales, where there has been growing focus on, for example, the ensuing social isolation and poor academic outcomes experienced by many (Children’s Commissioner, 2017, 2019).

There was some direct comment on the unharnessing of local authorities and schools in England too: ‘I’m observing how England has consistently disempowered the central role of the Council in terms of education, and it’s given a level of autonomy to schools that doesn’t have the same accountability and challenge’ (SLAO2, p. 41). SLAO2’s views were powerfully endorsed by the interviewees in England. Worries were also expressed by at least two interviewees in Wales that government policy in that country could lead to a similar disempowerment of LAs, likely to have a negative impact on exclusion levels.

#### *Understanding the complexity of young people’s lives*

All the Scottish interviewees remarked on the shift in schools towards deeper understanding of the needs of vulnerable children and young people in schools. The English interviewees tended to suggest movement, given financial pressures and an over-‘academic’ curriculum and inspection regime, in the opposite direction. The protective effect of a good educational experience and a positive school ethos was repeatedly noted by the Scottish interviewees as one of the key drivers in reducing exclusions. One commented: ‘We regard the “Closing the gap” agenda as a shorthand expression for all the work to interrupt the cycle of deprivation and its impact on attainment’ (SGO1, p. 36). They raised concerns about the use of unofficial exclusion [described as much reduced but still continuing by one interviewee (SGO1, p. 40)], because of the way it can obscure and leave unaddressed a child’s challenges or issues. There was support for the ‘nurturing’ approaches advocated by the Scottish Government (2017) and which many schools have adopted as one way to support children who may be at risk of exclusion broadly understood. The associations between poverty, exclusion and attainment were often addressed directly in these interviews, with a view that although there is lots of good work underway, ‘good isn’t good enough’ (SGO1, p. 40). For the interviewee working in the third sector, there was an additional observation: he sees an increasing number of referrals from schools ‘that are not poverty-stricken necessarily but ... children who stick out ... find it difficult to cope’ (STSO1, p. 71), making a link to mental health issues and the need to prioritise work with families as well as pupils.

The revised Scottish exclusions guidance (Scottish Government, 2017) was generally seen as very helpful in this respect. One spoke about it as ‘really great guidance. I

think it's been really useful for people like me in working to champion the kind of approaches that are more about meeting needs, and thinking about "well what is the purpose of your exclusion?" (SLAO2, p. 43). Welsh Government (2015) was similarly appreciated by a senior LA officer talking about the Welsh guidance. This was in stark contrast to views expressed by the English interviewees, some of whom referred to the current English guidance (DfE, 2017) as facilitating head teachers' regular use of exclusion. Also seen as helpful in Scotland was the Schools Education Management and Information System (SEEMiS) adopted in all 32 LAs. SEEMiS was seen by interviewees as underpinning much of the progress schools and LAs have been able to make in strategic tracking and monitoring of pupils at risk of exclusion, with SEEMiS assisting early intervention and support. An improvement in preventative tracking and monitoring using modern information technology packages was also noted by Welsh interviewees.

### *Continuing dissonance between policy and practice*

However, the Scottish interviewees readily admitted that there was some distance to travel on a range of issues and there were still gaps in knowledge. SLAO2 admitted that IEI 2 was 'quite aspirational in some parts' and she referred to the resistance of some head teachers to readmitting excluded children in a timely manner, and to teachers feeling that behavioural incidents were not taken seriously enough by senior staff. STSO1 highlighted some teachers' doubts about the 'presumption of mainstreaming', referring to continuing pressure from some head teachers for more behaviour units and continuing special school provision. Worries were expressed about the lack of national data on the work of behaviour support services in different areas, the potential misuse of support bases and flexible learning provision, and an entrenched punitive culture in some schools.

The Scottish interviewees expressed faith in the accuracy of the national data on 'removal from roll' and most believed that the recording of NPEs had become more accurate, with LA officers able to check on the precision of how schools recorded these through SEEMiS. However, as found in the interviews in the other UK jurisdictions, information on the extent of unofficial practices (particularly reduced timetables and sending children home early) was incomplete, informed by anecdotal reports and case histories. SLAO1 and SLAO2 felt that such practice was reducing but was still happening. Government officers noted that it tended to be third-sector organisations that drew their attention to unofficial exclusions, and that such practice could on occasion escape the gaze of school inspectors. STSO1 (p. 85) noted: 'We're working with a number of children who are sometimes in for an hour a day. . . or they're only in for the part of the afternoon that we [his organisation's support staff] can be with them'. Arrangements such as these, an apparently common form of unofficial exclusion, were also a major concern of the third-sector stakeholder interviewees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with LA officers there stressing the difficulties of quantifying these practices.

Most Scottish interviewees commented on the effects of the continuing funding issues for education and increasingly challenging workloads for teachers, with one

specifically referring to findings of a recent national review (Education Scotland, 2017), which reported that with:

constrained budgets and the need to make savings, we have seen many local authorities make substantial efficiencies at the centre, rather than in classrooms and front-line services. That has resulted in many authorities having a reduced capacity to undertake key functions such as supporting quality improvement, monitoring and challenging school performance and leading and coordinating professional learning. (p. 2)

Part of the reduced central capacity was the shrinkage in behaviour support services.

In England, budget pressures on LAs and schools have arguably been even more acute (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015) and have led to sharp reductions, reported by the English interviewees, in behaviour and special needs support and psychology services, thought to be linked to increasing exclusions.

The Scottish interviewees commented on the variable use by schools of the new sources of funding, such as pupil equity funding, made directly to schools. SLAO1 and SLAO2 feared the increased devolution of funding such as this directly to head teachers and away from LAs was following the current English path and could lead to more school exclusions. However, there was acknowledgement that it was too soon to make a fair assessment of this altered direction of travel.

Despite these continuing shortcomings and challenges, the Scottish interviewee accounts seemed to us to describe a shared commitment to a relatively successful prevention and national anti-exclusion strategy, with equity, wellbeing and inclusion at its core, despite the uncertainties posed by current financial and political flux.

## Discussion and conclusions

This article has provided a new analysis of Scotland's approach to school exclusion and drawn comparisons with larger patterns and trends, policy and practice across the UK, drawing on data from our larger UK-wide project on trajectories of school exclusion. The findings from this analysis—of exclusion statistics, national policy and guidance, and interviews with a small sample of key stakeholders—have highlighted key aspects of the success in reducing school exclusion in Scotland: the effectiveness of a strategic emphasis on prevention, of national/local co-design and planning, and of maintaining focus on the complexity of some young people's lives and the often deep levels of disadvantage. The findings suggest that Scotland may be 'different' but also that 'good is not good enough', and that there are significant areas of concern remaining, in relation to teachers' continuing concerns about disruptive behaviour, temporary and informal exclusions, the persistently high levels of exclusion among disadvantaged groups of young people, the potential abuse of part-time timetables and the most efficient use of scarce resources.

Despite continuing scepticism about the accuracy of some official data (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2012; Power & Taylor, 2018 and third-sector interviewees in this study), it is clear that the likelihood of exclusion is associated with 'risk factors' such as: having a special educational need (SEN), an area stressed by interviewees in this study in England and Wales; being of Black-Caribbean origin; being from a low socio-economic background; being in care; and being male (Strand & Fletcher,

2014). Young people with SEN and disability experience a layering of disadvantage (McCluskey *et al.*, 2015). They are more likely than their peers to live in single-parent families, in poverty, and in conditions of material hardship with poorer health outcomes (Daniels & Cole, 2010). Their families are more likely to be in debt and living in rented accommodation. Additionally, the mental health needs of young people—both at risk of exclusion and currently excluded—are substantial (Cole, 2015). A high proportion have undiagnosed disorders, many of which are treatable if young people are able to access services in a timely manner. The long-term personal consequences of unemployment are arguably highest for those excluded from school. We know that young people who are excluded from school are more likely to engage in offending behaviour and that the offending behaviour of those that do offend is likely to worsen (e.g. Berridge *et al.*, 2001) and lead to increased risk of victimisation (McAra & McVie, 2010). Given widespread concerns about the vulnerability of young people in relation to gang-related activity and involvement in ‘county lines’ (Glover Williams & Finlay, 2018; Stone, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2019), the benefits of a holistic, ‘one service approach’ seem more important than ever.

The disparities between rates of exclusion in the four nations have been noted in the past but there has been, to our knowledge, no academic research on how the different policy landscapes of the four nations affect exclusion or the underlying cultural, social and historical factors behind different practices. Much of the previous research on permanent exclusion explores the negative associations with long-term consequences. The bulk of this earlier work has focused on single outcome measures such as attainment, but until now little has been done (Daniels *et al.*, 2003 was an exception) to understand how different aspects of policy and practice interconnect and how these impact the lives of excluded young people.

The findings reported here suggest, as did Daniels *et al.* (2003), that an interdisciplinary or partnership approach—with regard to both the experience of the young people affected, and the terms of the support services available to them and their families—continues to be needed to address the serious gaps in knowledge about the contexts, causes and consequences of exclusion (how different factors inter-relate) and the trajectories for young people post-exclusion. To date there has been no attempt to explore the significance of the differences between the four UK nations, both in official and unofficial exclusion, nor any attempt to contextualise any such exploration within the discussion of national education policy priorities and commitments. Research must take up this urgent challenge. This study marks a significant point of departure and we hope that our RG is able, through a more comprehensive and detailed study, to continue on this journey.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, funding is being sought for this larger study.

- <sup>2</sup> A request for an interview with an official at the Department for Education, London was not granted. Two other interviewees withdrew.
- <sup>3</sup> Interviews in Northern Ireland had to be conducted by the senior researcher alone.
- <sup>4</sup> Figures 1 and 3 are taken from Cole (2019).
- <sup>5</sup> The official Welsh Government figures for number of fixed-term exclusions of 5 or less days and of over 5 days have been added together to allow comparison with the other UK jurisdictions. It should also be noted that figures for exclusions from PRUs were not included in 2012/13 but were included in 2016/17, pushing up the NPE rate by 0.21% (figures from Welsh Government, 2018, table 1).
- <sup>6</sup> For Northern Ireland, all children in Years 1–7 have been included but not the few thousand children in nursery classes within grant-aided primary schools.
- <sup>7</sup> Changes to the method of collecting and presenting data by the Welsh Government made it unsafe to include a percentage for Wales before 2011/12.
- <sup>8</sup> *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1* (2007) offers guidance to schools on managing attendance and absence. It is currently being updated.
- <sup>9</sup> Page numbers refer to Cole (2018), Part II: Scotland. This document also contains sections on the English, Welsh and Northern Irish data, to which reference is made in this article.

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