

How do we progress racial justice in education?

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School exclusion, systemic racism and off-rolling

Announcing a new ‘Behaviour Hubs’ scheme, education secretary Gavin Williamson spoke of supporting “vulnerable and disadvantaged children with the routines and structures needed”.¹ This is yet another example of attention being diverted away from exclusionary practices that are denying children access to high-quality education. These practices and their disproportionate impact on minoritised pupils have been repeatedly identified, with little systematic action forthcoming. While formal exclusions continue as part of a so-called ‘firm approach’, less attention is paid to informal and sometimes illegal exclusions – specifically, the practice known as ‘off-rolling’.

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Off-rolling is a particular *type* of exclusion from school. It occurs when a school removes a pupil from their school roll without recourse to formal, permanent exclusion. There is no legal definition of off-rolling. In the research carried out by Done and Knowler, off-rolling is explained as part of a much more extensive continuum of exclusionary practices that are happening in schools, ranging from the unacceptable to the illegal.² Done

1 Department for Education (2021) ‘Behaviour experts to support schools with poor discipline’, DfE press release, 7 April 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/behaviour-experts-to-support-schools-with-poor-discipline>

2 Knowler H and Done EJ (2019) ‘Exploring senior leaders’ experiences of off-rolling in mainstream secondary schools in England’, British Educational Research Association blog, 5 April 2019. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/exploring-senior-leaders-experiences-of-off-rolling-in-mainstream-secondary-schools-in-england>

and Knowler argue that these practices are intended to circumvent official practices and formal exclusion, and can manifest as ‘informal’ managed moves, coerced home schooling and inappropriate moves into other settings such as alternative provision. These moves are often not in the academic best interests of the child – instead, they are what Anne Longfield (then children’s commissioner) once described as ‘pushing vulnerable pupils out through the back door’.³

Historically, the use of illegal school exclusion – effectively the denial of a right to an education – was a tactic used in US states in the 1960s and 1970s to maintain racist structures and systems, even after the abolition of segregated education. Black pupils were ‘pushed out’ from school, apparently because of poor school performance, repeated but minor behaviour infractions or suggestions that the school was not the ‘right’ place for them to attend.⁴ In England around the same time, Bernard Coard published his ground-breaking pamphlet ‘How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system: the scandal of the Black child in schools in Britain’ (1971), which galvanised Black parents and educationalists into action in the decades that followed, spurring on the growth of the Black supplementary schools movement – a form of self-help and a way to fight racial discrimination.⁵

Coard exposed the ways in which immigrant children were disproportionately moved to special schools following racially biased assessments of educational needs.⁶ In addition, the authorities misled Black parents into believing these placements would enhance the education of their children. At the time of Coard’s writing, around 34 per cent of the school population in so-called ‘educationally subnormal’ (ESN) schools were from Black Caribbean backgrounds. This knowledge in turn led to the famous ‘sin bin’ campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating

3 Santry C (2018) “‘Vulnerable pupils are being pushed out of school through the back door’”, children’s commissioner warning’, Tes website, 21 March 2018. <https://www.tes.com/news/vulnerable-pupils-are-being-pushed-out-school-through-back-door-childrens-commissioner-warning>

4 School Discipline Support Initiative (undated) ‘Pushout’, School Discipline Support Initiative website. <https://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/push-out>

5 Coard B (1971) *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black child in Schools in Britain*, New Beacon Books. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED054281>

6 George Padmore Institute (undated) ‘Black education movement’, George Padmore Institute website. <https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/collections/the-black-education-movement-1965-1988>

how racial injustices – writ large in exclusionary practices in education – have generated grassroots activism going back 50 years or more, even before words such as ‘off-rolling’ were used.⁷

DENYING THE PROBLEM

Today, off-rolling continues to do significant damage. Most recently, this can be seen in the case of Tashaun Aird – a 15-year-old boy who was stabbed to death in east London in 2019. The serious case review into Tashaun’s murder, following his being off-rolled from school, showed multiple missed opportunities to either report off-rolling or prevent further exclusion from an alternative placement.⁸ Despite this case, and others like it, the trend is still to deny the problem and the racial injustice that underpins it.

“Today, off-rolling continues to do significant damage”

The 2019 Timpson review of school exclusion in England was expected to be a turning point in the ways that exclusionary practices were understood, and the review itself was an outcome of the Race Disparity Audit in 2017.^{9,10} However, from a racial justice perspective, it failed to achieve what it was originally intended to do; in fact, only three out of 30 of Timpson’s recommendations addressed racial disparities in exclusionary practices.¹¹

It is a disappointing fact that the review has led to further obfuscation rather than illumination, meaning that off-rolling is likely to be continuing even throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Timpson analysis, while problematic, does confirm that Black Caribbean boys and girls are more likely than others to be permanently excluded from school, and that this is a statistically significant association.

7 Black Cultural Archives (undated) *Subject Guide: Protest and Campaigns*. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a01baa7d7bdcee985c80c15/t/5a0892cf71c10b6a451eac84/1510511312680/2016_Protest-movement_v4.0.pdf

8 Burford R (2021) ‘Tashaun Aird: 15-year-old was “illegally expelled from school” and “exploited by gangs” before he was stabbed to death’, *Evening Standard*, 22 January 2021. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/tashaun-aird-murder-expelled-school-gang-b306771.html>

9 HM Government (2019) *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

10 Cabinet Office (2017) *Race Disparity Audit*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686071/Revised_RDA_report_March_2018.pdf

11 Haque Z (2019) ‘Timpson review: where was the acknowledgement of race?’, Tes website, 13 May 2019. <https://www.tes.com/news/timpson-review-where-was-acknowledgment-race>

Yet this is used in the review to explain that the ratio is not as high as the raw data – that is, it is subjectively interpreted as part of the case for *inaction*. Whether or not the ratio is as high as the raw data, the result is still statistically significant – and it follows that racial discrepancies in exclusions and, by implication, ‘unofficial’ exclusions are explained by racial discrimination.

Instead of acknowledging the significance of racism in exclusionary practices, Timpson’s findings deflected analysis away from racial disparities, instead raising locality issues, school issues or the impact of trauma. No one doubts that school exclusions are a multilayered problem, but to underplay the importance of statistically significant results that point to the impact of racial discrimination is deeply problematic. Gillborn notes that the use of statistics is never neutral and that interrogation of the ways that numbers can be manipulated is vital to explore how deficit discourses are promoted through the types of analysis seen in the Timpson review.¹² This also relates to what Gillborn calls “tacit intentionality” – noting that, although race inequity may not be an intended goal of education policymaking, the impacts of education policies on people are experienced that way.¹³ These points help us understand the Timpson review as a means to explain away racial injustice, and a missed opportunity for specific recommendations to address that injustice in exclusionary practices.

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THE HIDDEN NATURE OF OFF-ROLLING

While off-rolling was brought into sharp focus in 2019 following an Ofsted blog and further analysis of ‘unexplained exits’ in a 2019 Education Policy Institute report, it is a very particular exclusionary practice that has resulted from the entanglement of a range of competing policy initiatives, such as school performance policies, austerity pressures and inclusion

12 Gillborn D, Warmington P and Demack S (2017) ‘QuantCrit: education, policy, “big data” and principles for a critical race theory of statistics’, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2): 158–179. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13613324.2017.1377417>

13 Gillborn D (2007) ‘Education policy as an act of white supremacy: whiteness, critical race theory and education reform’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(4): 485–505. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680930500132346>

policies.^{14,15} It appears to happen in secondary schools more than primary schools and is most evident in Year 11 census data. However, Machin and Sandi argue that the precursors of exclusionary practices that lead to off-rolling can be seen from as early as Year 9.¹⁶

There is a good deal of confusion about what constitutes off-rolling, which in turn makes it hard to record. While the definition posited by Ofsted states that ‘gaming’ of academic performance data is the main reason off-rolling happens, other sources say that poor behaviour is often the primary reason that schools engage in off-rolling to avoid a permanent exclusion that would then be noted in official school performance data. While it is likely due to a combination of both factors, the distinctive feature of off-rolling is that it is ‘hidden’ and hard for other professionals (and particularly parents) to discern. Once off-rolling has been identified, it becomes apparent that these ‘off-rolled’ children and young people did not ‘drop out’ or disengage, nor did they receive a formal exclusion (suspension or expulsion). Instead, they are often told that they should leave their current placement for attainment reasons or that their educational needs can no longer be met in their current placement. It might be difficult to imagine that this takes place, given the high scrutiny schools are under; however, these practices often persist undetected. In some cases, they are even presented as benevolence. In 2011, the *No Excuses* report published by the Centre for Social Justice noted that illegal exclusions and practices such as off-rolling were ‘well documented’ and ‘repeatedly corroborated’ in evidence given to their inquiry into educational exclusion.¹⁷

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Despite Ofsted’s focus on this practice and apparent spearheading of its eradication, it has been criticised for using a range of approaches to

14 Owen D (2019) ‘What is off-rolling, and how does Ofsted look at it on inspection?’, Ofsted blog, 10 May 2019. <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2019/05/10/what-is-off-rolling-and-how-does-ofsted-look-at-it-on-inspection>

15 Education Policy Institute (2019) *Unexplained Pupil Exits from Schools: A Growing Problem?* <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/unexplained-pupil-exits>

16 Machin S and Sandi M (2018) ‘Autonomous schools and strategic pupil exclusion’, discussion paper, Centre for Economic Performance. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88678/1/dp1527.pdf>

17 Centre for Social Justice (2011) *No Excuses: A Review of Educational Exclusion*. https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/CSJ_Educational_Exclusion.pdf

determining evidence for off-rolling in inspections and for not consistently applying the same definition among school settings. A 2020 Tes investigation showed that some schools are downgraded for off-rolling, while others are not. Lived experience and small-scale parental work suggest that many families face regular exclusionary practices, to the extent that they self-remove their children as a protective action.¹⁸ These examples are unlikely to be counted as off-rolling but they are most definitely exclusionary.

Given the ‘hidden’ nature of off-rolling, prevalence can be hard to ascertain, but the Education Policy Institute report from 2019 gives the clearest picture to date. As many as 49,101 students from the school cohort who were set to have completed Year 11 in 2017 ‘disappeared’ from school rolls with no explanation given – the equivalent of one in 12 pupils (or 8.1 per cent). Further examination of figures on school leavers suggested that one in 10 pupils experienced an unexplained exit during their time at secondary school (and there was some evidence to suggest that the rate of unexplained exits had increased over time), while 1.2 per cent of pupils experienced multiple unexplained exits. Only 4.4 per cent of pupils who experienced an unexplained exit had returned to their original school by Year 11 and 40 per cent of pupils who experienced an unexplained exit went to an unknown destination and never returned to the state school system. The report notes that “the overwhelming majority of unexplained exits – around three quarters – are experienced by vulnerable pupils, for example 27 per cent have ‘social, emotional and mental health’ needs”. The report also notes that one in seven (around 14 per cent) are from “black ethnic backgrounds”, a disproportionate figure.¹⁹

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Gaps in accountability have closed to a small extent. The ‘naming and shaming’ of schools in the media has brought the practice more sharply to public attention, resulting in changes in the school inspection framework, with the recommendation to downgrade inspection gradings if evidence of

18 Roberts J (2020) ‘What are the rules? Ofsted’s off-rolling confusion’, Tes website, 31 January 2020. <https://www.tes.com/news/what-are-rules-ofsted-s-rolling-confusion>

19 Hutchinson, J; Crenna-Jennings, W (2019) *Unexplained Pupil Exits from Schools*. Education Policy Institute; National Education Union. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Unexplained-pupil-moves_LAs-MATs_EPI-2019.pdf

off-rolling is found.²⁰ Clearly, a major barrier to discussing and understanding the true extent and impacts of illegal exclusions is the possibility of facing serious consequences for inspection grading, reputational damage and an outing in the press. Shame and fear are hardly conducive to productive dialogues about how to prevent the practice, since the first step would be to admit that it happens.

GOING FORWARD

Fifty years after Coard's seminal book on the denial of school education to Black children, organisations such as No More Exclusions are still calling for the basic right to an education to be enacted for all learners. Behaviour hubs are not the answer to stopping off-rolling or other forms of potentially illegal exclusions. The establishment of a national helpline for parents of children and young people, where illegality is suspected, could shift the dialogue about how to overcome this issue. A helpline of this kind could maintain a register or advocate who can support and accompany parents to secure the best education for their child and offer basic legal advice on school exclusion. While legal remedies are no substitute for policy change, parents and carers in the US who have this kind of legal literacy and support have had success in overturning illegal pushout practices.

Off-rolling and other exclusionary practices have wider impacts for housing, health, welfare, criminal justice and employment policy and so it has been significant that trade unions,²¹ think tanks,²² activists,²³ and mental health practitioners,^{24,25} are now campaigning for a moratorium on

20 Allen-Kinross P (2019) 'Two more schools rapped by Ofsted for off-rolling', Schools Week website, 24 June 2019. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/two-more-schools-rapped-by-ofsted-for-off-rolling>

21 Speck D (2021) 'Teachers back push to pause exclusions post-pandemic', Tes website, 8 April 2021. <https://www.tes.com/news/teachers-back-push-pause-school-exclusions-post-pandemic>

22 Woman and Equalities Committee (2020) 'Impact of coronavirus on children's education', oral evidence, House of Commons. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/951/html>

23 No More Exclusions (2021) 'The time to end school exclusions is now', *The Voice*, 9 April 2021. <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/opinion/comment/2021/04/09/the-time-to-end-school-exclusions-is-now>

24 Psychologists for Social Change (2021) 'PSC support the moratorium on school exclusions in England', PSC website, 8 April 2021. <http://www.psychchange.org/psychologists-for-social-change-support-the-moratorium-on-school-exclusions-in-england.html>

25 Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2021) 'Behaviour and discipline in schools: The impact on mental health and wellbeing', CYPMHC website, 4 May 2021. <https://cypmhc.org.uk/behaviour-and-discipline-in-schools-the-impact-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing/>

exclusions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Until the systemic conditions and institutionally racist cultures, policies and practices that legitimise exclusionary practices are transformed, we will not be able to say with any conviction that every Black child in Britain does not remain at a higher risk of leaving mainstream education prematurely and, with the worst outcomes, through the back door.

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Helen Knowler is a researcher and lecturer at the University of Exeter. Her work focuses on permanent exclusion from school, and she is currently exploring the policy impacts of off-rolling and other exclusionary practices and the implications for practitioners. She has worked as an advisory teacher, a classroom teacher and leads on the National Award for SEN Coordination at Exeter.

Jabeer Butt is chief executive of the Race Equality Foundation. Jabeer has researched and written extensively about racial inequality in care and health. Jabeer provides leadership on the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities parent education initiative at the Foundation. Jabeer was on the Marmot Advisory Group supporting Sir Michael Marmot in the production of his recent report on the social determinants of health inequalities. He is currently co-investigator on the £1.3 million NIHR funded extension of the VirusWatch study, focussing on Covid-19 and BAME communities, led by Professor Robert Aldridge of University College London.