School exclusions in Wales: policy discourse and policy enactment
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This paper contributes to our growing understanding of the processes underpinning contrasting rates of school exclusions both within and across the different jurisdictions of the UK. Wales is often compared favourably to its larger neighbour England, where rates of permanent exclusions have risen dramatically in recent years. One explanation for Wales' lower rates might lie in the very different values which underpin its education policies. However, the prevailing policy discourse can only be part of the explanation and cannot account for the high levels of variation in rates of 'official' school exclusions across Wales, nor the many forms of 'hidden' exclusion going on in Welsh schools. Drawing on interview data with policy-makers and practitioners, this paper points to the need to explore how policy is enacted at the local level. This entails taking into account the often unacknowledged conditions in which schools operate and the unintended consequences of policy imperatives which can lead to outcomes that frustrate and undermine anti-exclusionary practices and processes.

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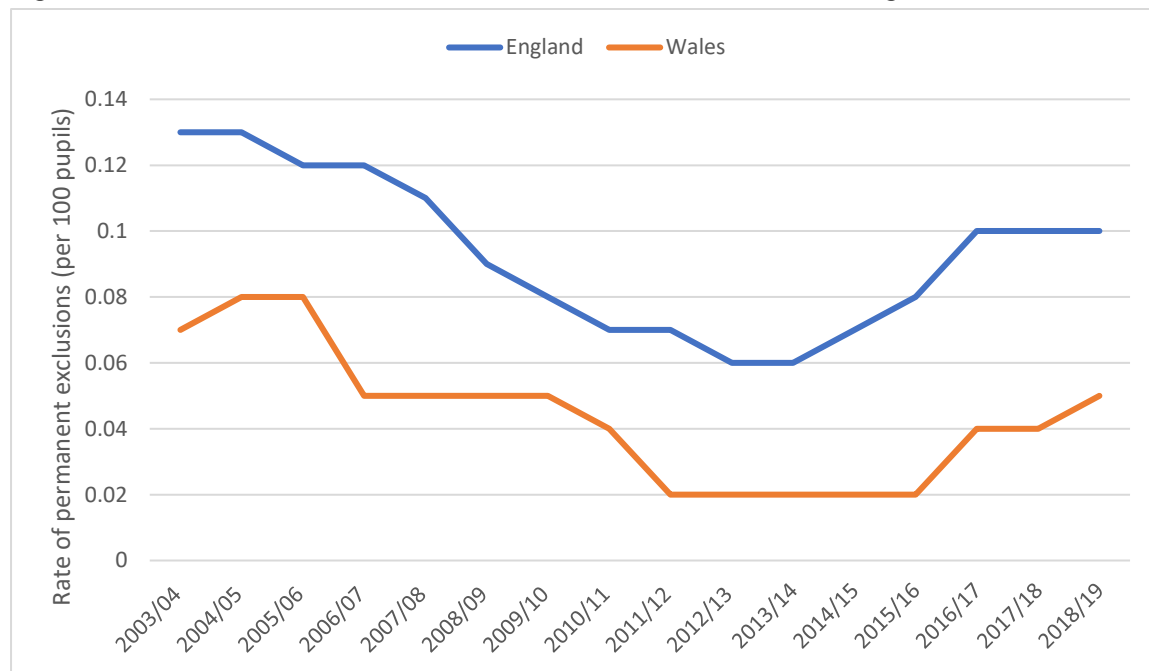
Introduction

The negative consequences of school exclusion for individual young people and for society as a whole are well-documented. Munn *et. al* (2000; 2005) illuminate the short- and longer-term difficulties for excluded pupils, such as feelings of personal failure and anxieties about the future. Additionally, a range of research studies and reviews (Daniels 2011; Pirrie *et al* 2011; Valdebenito *et al.* 2017) indicates that young people who have been excluded from school suffer prolonged periods of unemployment, poor mental and physical health, homelessness and are more likely to be involved in criminal activities.

But while the consequences of school exclusion are now widely acknowledged, the underlying processes that lead to exclusion are less clear. Actions on the part of the young people themselves are clearly part of the explanation, but cannot be the whole story. The fact that there are very different rates of school exclusion reported in the different jurisdictions of the UK indicates that there must be *system* level factors that need to be considered.

In terms of system level aspects, Wales is often compared favourably to its larger neighbour England. Although there has been an increase in school exclusions in Wales in recent years, rates of both fixed term and permanent exclusions remain much lower than in England (Figure 1). While we need to be cautious about cross-national comparisons as the definitions and reporting practices are slightly different (see McCluskey *et al.* 2019), it is clear that there are significant differences between the two countries. In 2018/19, the rate of permanent exclusion in England was twice that of Wales (1 per 1000 compared to .5 per 1000) and the rate of temporary exclusions was nearly 40% higher (54 per 1000 compared to 39 per 1000).

Figure 1: Rates of Permanent Exclusions 2003-2018 in Wales and England

One explanation for Wales' lower rates might lie in the very different values which underpin its education policies. However, the prevailing policy discourse cannot account for the high levels of variation in rates of 'official' school exclusions across Wales. For example, Denbighshire has rates of exclusion that are nearly three times higher than those of Ceredigion. Nor can it account for the many forms of 'hidden' exclusion in Welsh schools (see Power & Taylor 2020).

Understanding these variations in exclusion rates across the country and the practices of hidden exclusions requires us to have a more complex understanding of the policy process. In order to undertake this exploration, we draw on some of the concepts developed by Stephen Ball and his colleagues, especially those of the 'policy cycle' (Bowe *et al.* 1992) and 'policy enactment' (Ball 1994; Braun et al. 2011). Briefly, a consistent theme of Ball's policy sociology is the need to recognise that policy is a *process* and not a legislative fiat. Policy is made and remade in different contexts and in different ways. In its simplest form, the policy cycle model (Bowe *et al.* 1992: 19-20) identifies three contexts in which policy is remade: a context of influence, a context of text production, and a context of practice. The translation of policy from one context to another is not straightforward.

The context of influence is the general political arena in which policies are shaped, it is the space in which competing ideologies are voiced, and can include not just the conventional

political parties, but other players, such as trades unions, professional associations and think tanks. It is the context of influence that shapes the discourse. The context of text production is the interface between the discourse and how it gets operationalised into formal policies and guidelines. It is not of course a single 'context', but a series of spaces where the discourse gets turned into legislation and guidance – at both national and local authority level. Finally, there is the context of practice in which the ideas and words of the policy are to be turned into actionable decisions. There is though significant slippage between the discourse and the arena of practice. As Bowe *et al.* (1992:22) remind us 'policy is not simply received and implemented within this arena rather it is subject to interpretation and then 'recreated'.'

In attempting to understand how the policy on school exclusions is variously recreated at the level of the school, it is important to take into account both unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences (Giddens 1976). In terms of unacknowledged conditions, the 'school' that is invoked in policy discourse is very different from the school situated 'on the ground'. As Braun *et al.* (2011: 585) point out:

> ... policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making and research, these sorts of constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected.

The constraints, pressures and enablers schools experience can take a variety of forms. Braun *et al.* (2011) argue that these can be usefully categorised in terms of their 'situated', 'professional', 'material' and 'external' dimensions. These unacknowledged conditions mean that schools are variously able to implement the policy 'as intended'. They may also respond to policies in creative ways, particularly when confronted with competing policy priorities and pressures. These responses may not only frustrate the intentions of policy-makers but may actually be counterproductive.

In the following sections we briefly describe our data sources before going on to explain how the policy of school exclusions in Wales gets framed within the contexts of influence and text production before being enacted in schools.

Data sources
In order to explore the policy discourse and enactment of school exclusions in Wales, we draw on data from two different research projects. In order to explore the development of the policy discourse in the contexts of influence and text production, we have drawn upon semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a broader research project[1] into the disparities in rates of exclusion across the four jurisdictions of the UK, undertaken with the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh, and Queen's University, Belfast. In this paper, we draw on interview

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[1] Funded by the John Fell Fund, University of Oxford.

data from four senior policy-makers in Wales – two from the Welsh Government (WGO1 and WGO2), one from a local authority (LAO) and one from a third sector organisation (TSO) that offers support and guidance to young people 'at risk' of exclusion. These semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2017, were designed to explore the policy process, and policy-makers' perceptions of the most appropriate ways to deal with the challenge of school exclusions.

In order to explore how these policies are enacted in the context of practice, we also draw on interviews with headteachers from twelve secondary schools in Wales, also undertaken in 2017. These schools are part of the WISERDEducation Multi-Cohort Study (WMCS)[2] and have been selected to include diverse communities (advantaged and disadvantaged, rural and urban, Welsh and English-speaking). Interviews with the headteachers were conducted in either Welsh or English using a semi-structured schedule that included questions on the challenges the school faced in terms of discipline, the various approaches the school used when dealing with challenging behaviour and the extent to which they used fixed term and permanent exclusions. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms for schools are used throughout.

THE POLICY DISCOURSE OF EXCLUSION IN WALES
The context of influence
The political climate in which education policy is made in Wales is very different from that which prevails in England, and the difference has grown since parliamentary devolution in 1999. In 2002, Wales' First Minister, Rhodri Morgan promised to put 'clear red water' between Wales and England (Morgan 2002). Welsh policy would be based on the Welsh Government's core principles of a strong government, cooperation rather than competition, universalism rather than choice and diversity, and progressivism rather than traditionalism (Drakeford 2007). A crude representation of the contrasting policy discourses of England and Wales is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: The 'clear red water' of contrasting policy discourses

Wales	England
Universalism	Diversification
Ethic of participation	Ethic of consumerism
Cooperation is better than competition	Competition is necessary to drive standards
Progressivism	Cultural restoration
Good government is good for you	Government control should be minimal
Trust professionals	Challenge professionals
Greater equality of outcome	Greater equality of opportunity

Sources: Derived from Drakeford's (2007) eight core principles of social justice and Power (2016).

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[2] Funded by HEFCW and Cardiff University.

These different principles have important implications for the discursive framing of education policy in general and how to deal with school exclusions in particular. For example, the Welsh Government's commitment to universal provision means that there is relatively little diversification within the school system. Unlike England, there are no state-maintained, free schools, academies or grammar schools. Where there is diversification in Wales it is largely rooted in the socio-cultural geography of Wales (i.e., faith schools and Welsh medium schools). The diversification of the English school system reflects a commitment to building a quasi-market in education, in which parents are viewed as consumers to whom schools must 'sell' themselves in order to remain viable. It is through making schools compete with each other that policy-makers in England believe that schools will raise their standards. A key component in driving forward the competition agenda is the annual publication of school league tables, through which parents can compare schools.

It is maintained (e.g., Parsons 2005) that the marketisation of education in England has contributed to the rise in school exclusions. It is argued that this creates pressures for schools to exclude any students who will negatively affect their performance data and 'league table' position (e.g., Booth et al. 1997; Gazeley et al. 2015). It is also the case that the growth of academies and free schools, which operate outside the control of local authorities, may feel more inclined to exclude than other types of school (Gorard 2005). This is certainly the perception of many in Wales. As our third sector respondent commented :

> I get the impression looking over the border that academies have far more emphasis on output, you know, attainment and ... they do it very carefully in selecting their pupils to start with. And they're very intolerant of behavioural difficulties. (TSO)

None of these market mechanisms have been introduced in Wales. There is no official publication of performance data through which 'league tables' can be compiled. In place of league tables, Wales has used an annual categorisation system in which schools are hierarchically classified using a colour coded system of Green, Yellow, Orange and Red. The categorisation is based on a complex range of factors, which includes attendance and inclusion, and interviews with the headteacher to gauge the school's capacity to improve.

Alongside the marketisation of education in England is a Conservative-led agenda of cultural restoration (Ball 1993) which has led to a reinvigorated traditionalism. This also has implications for rates of school exclusion. It might be argued that this not only leads to disengagement of students who struggle academically but also requires greater levels of conformity to school rules. There is, for instance, frequent press coverage of students who have been excluded from schools in England for not wearing the right uniform (e.g. Duggan 2020), having the 'wrong' hairstyle (e.g. Busby 2020) or putting on 'too much' make-up (e.g. Hartley-Parkinson 2017). In contrast to England's project of cultural restoration, Wales is

pursuing a progressivism in its education policy. This is most clearly evident in the new *Curriculum for Wales* (WG 2020) that is being developed where subjects are being replaced with integrated 'Areas of Learning and Experience' as the principal organisational units of the curriculum.

In addition to the consequences of marketisation and cultural restoration, the delegation of funding to schools in England, and the growth of providers who are state-funded but operate outwith local authority control, has led to the diminution of centralised resources to support excluded and 'at-risk' of exclusion students. The principle of 'good government' in Wales means that local authority control of education remains relatively strong. Furthermore, the principle of collaboration in Wales enables local authorities and trade unions to be powerful players in the context of influence – unlike in England where they have been largely excluded from the policy arena since the 1980s (Ball 1990).

In addition to putting 'clear red water' between Wales and England, the Welsh Government has been influenced by policy developments in other small countries, such as Finland, New Zealand and Scotland. Scotland in particular has been an important player in the context of influence. This is most recently evident in the appointment of Graham Donaldson, the former Head of the Scottish Inspectorate of Education, to lead the review which led to the current radical redesign of the Welsh curriculum. Wales has also looked to Scotland for expertise in how to lower the rate of school exclusions. In 2011, the Welsh Government commissioned experts from the University of Edinburgh to undertake an evaluation of education provision for children and young people educated outside school (McCluskey *et al.* 2013). Their evaluation also made a series of recommendations, all of which were accepted either in whole or in part by the Welsh Government (Lewis 2014) – which brings us to the context of text production.

The context of text production
Since parliamentary devolution, reducing school exclusions has been a priority for the Welsh Government. In 2001, the Government laid out its ambitions for the first ten years of devolution in *The Learning Country: A Paving Document* (NAfW 2001). This document draws attention to the 'socially costly and personally damaging effects of exclusion' (30) and set a target of reducing the number of school exclusions by a third.

Since then, the Welsh Government has published successive guidance documents setting out the principles and procedures around both fixed-term and permanent exclusions (see McCluskey et al, 2013), the most recent of which was published in 2019 (WG 2019). The text of these documents, like that of Scotland, reflects the very different policy context. As McCluskey *et al.* (2019) found, the language around exclusions in England is far more punitive in tone than that of either Scotland or Wales.

The Welsh Government Guidance (WG 2019) is framed by reference to the Equality Act 2010 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989). Like that of Scotland, the Guidance makes it very clear that exclusion should only be used as a last resort:

> A decision to exclude a learner permanently is a serious one. It will usually be the final step in a process for dealing with disciplinary offences following a wide range of other strategies, which have been tried without success .... It is an acknowledgement by the school that it has exhausted all available strategies for dealing with the learner and should normally be used as a last resort (WG 2019: 8).

The Guidance makes it clear that exclusion 'should not be imposed in the heat of the moment'. Prior to the decision to exclude, the school needs to ensure that an 'appropriate investigation has been carried out', for which evidence must be provided, and which takes into account the appropriate equality legislation (WG 2019: 7). The following reasons are cited as insufficient grounds for exclusion of any kind: minor incidents such as failure to do homework; poor academic performance; lateness or truancy or breaches of school uniform rules or rules on appearance (WG 2019: 8).

The language of the policy texts is also echoed on the language of the Welsh Government policy officers:

> As a result of a University of Edinburgh report we strengthened all of the references to exclusions that came in the inclusion and pupil support document to make it clear that the Welsh Government considered it a matter of absolute last resort and that everything, all of the other interventions, should be tried before an exclusion took place. (WGO2)

As her colleague outlines, the emphasis is on working in partnership with Estyn (the Welsh education inspectorate) and schools to prevent exclusions through focusing on wellbeing rather than behaviour management:

> We've had a real focus on improving attendance and trying to bring down the numbers of exclusions, so I think certainly the messages have been coming out clearly from the Welsh government and trickling down and also in terms of Estyn as well and the focus there. And I think we've got a real focus on wellbeing because there are reasons why a child or a learner may be acting in a particular way and in Wales we place great emphasis on the wellbeing of learners. (WGO1)

She argues that the approach needs to be one of understanding why the young person is behaving in a particular way rather than disciplining them:

No child is born naughty or bold, there are reasons and so it's looking behind the reasons why a child might be acting out in a certain way which could then mean that they actually could end up being excluded, so it's looking at the reasons why, trying to support our children and young people. (WGO1)

These sentiments are echoed at local authority level, as is evident in the following comments from our local authority respondent:

These kids are not evil, they're not going into school and making a conscious decision that they're going to do something which gets them excluded (LAO)

Again, and unlike England, there is a move away from the language of 'behaviour' towards the language of 'wellbeing':

We're trying to do away with the term 'behaviour' support. So, we've got an Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team which comprises the old Behaviour Support Team and the Speech and Language and Communication Team. So, we got together with those teams and said, "Look, most of these kids have got learning difficulties, communication difficulties and diagnosed mental health problems; the sooner we start talking in those terms, the better". (LAO).

There is little doubt that the discourse surrounding school exclusions within the key policy arenas is different from that which prevails in England – and this may contribute to the lower rates of school exclusion. However, it can be only part of the explanation. As noted earlier, national level policies and priorities cannot explain local level variations at the level of authorities and schools. There is, as Bowe *et al.* (1992) identify, considerable slippage between the policy as framed within the context of influence and the context of text production, and what happens in the context of practice, which is where we turn to next.

POLICY ENACTMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF PRACTICE
In trying to unravel the slippage between policy discourse and policy enactment we look at the two related dimensions of unacknowledged conditions and unanticipated outcomes. As noted in the introduction, system-wide analyses of education policy often overlook the very different circumstances and attributes of schools at the local level. But these have significant bearing on the capabilities of institutions to enact the policy in the ways in which it was intended. In addition, policies can have unintended consequences when schools face competing priorities.

As Braun *et al.* (2011: 585) argue, policies are 'intimately shaped and influenced' by school specific factors – factors that often get overlooked in discussions about national policy:

While from the 'outside' a school may look like it is straightforwardly adopting a number of policies, schools have different capacities for 'coping' with policy and assembling school-based policy responses ... what happens inside a school in terms of how policies are interpreted and enacted will be mediated by institutionally determined factors. (2011: 586)

Thus, the pressure on schools *not* to exclude may perversely encourage practices that are just as exclusionary but hidden – and particularly in circumstances where the school has limited material and human resources to support students within the school.

Unacknowledged conditions

Braun *et al.* (2011) highlight four inter-related aspects of a school's context that have a bearing on how a policy is enacted: professional contexts (such as school values); material contexts (staffing, buildings etc); situated contexts (such as school intake) and external contexts (local authority support). We explore each of these dimensions in turn in relation to schools' practices of inclusion/exclusion.

Professional context

Often when school-level variations in outcomes are discussed, whether in terms of attainment, attendance or exclusion, the focus is on the kind of ethos that the leadership team embodies. Interviews with headteachers provide only a partial perspective on a school's ethos, as we cannot presume that their values are shared across the institution. Nevertheless, our interviews indicate that there are differences in how headteachers frame the challenge of student disruption.

The headteacher of Ysgol St Non, for example, emphasises his accessibility to his students, and a reluctance to deal with students in a punitive way. Indeed, he largely frames the response to student disruption as the responsibility of the teacher to make their lessons 'interesting':

They [the students] often come into my room as a headteacher to talk to me as well. I'm accessible ... We don't have a remove room like some schools have, like a punishment room. We don't have that sort of thing here. And I would be reluctant to go down that route. I'm more along the lines of trying to tell my staff if you make the lessons interesting and engaging and differentiated so the children can access things, a) they're going to want to turn up so attendance levels will rise and b) the low-level disruption will be minimal because they are doing something that they find interesting, really, as well. That's the general approach and also using rewards more than sanctions.

The headteacher at Portside similarly sees changing teachers' practices as the way to tackle student disruption, and the importance of 'de-escalation':

We have a system that's structured in place whereby we try to de-escalate the situation. It is important when a situation has arisen you know it's to de-escalate in the first instance before trying to intervene. We've got professional development for staff so that they are aware of the systems that are in place.

Without wishing to downplay the importance of ethos, it is important to bear in mind the context in which particular kinds of professional values might be enabled to flourish. It is worth noting that both Ysgol St Non and Portside have relatively privileged student intakes, with well below average intakes of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). These more advantaged intakes are likely to have fewer 'at-risk' students and more resources to support them. We turn to the issue of resources next.

Material context
Across the twelve schools there are clearly differences in their access to material resources – both in terms of physical infrastructure and staffing. Some schools have the capacity to relocate disruptive students internally.

> We have an inclusion unit where pupils might go for a day or two days if they've been involved in a behaviour incident. (Freshfield)

> We have developed our own 'Nurture' facility in school because we've had to. Quite a significant group of our pupils are either taught in this nurture facility for 100% of the time. (Bridgetown)

> We use internal isolation. ... they're in a…in a particular room …it's boothed off and they have work to do … basically they can't communicate. (Burrington High)

And some schools even have the resources to hire buildings where the students can be sent:

> We have off-site provision where we rent a room and we educate students off-site. For example, in Year 11, if there was an exclusion, it could be a small group of students who are persistently misbehaving, who are disturbing the learning of others and all the various interventions have been put in place, and they still are not working. Then we can educate them off-site. (Portside)

Providing this separate accommodation to keep students on the register but out of the mainstream classroom not only requires physical space but dedicated staffing:

> The Year 11 class that's in there, I think it's seven pupils. You can often have two members of staff in there with the seven pupils. These are extremely challenging pupils. It's a really expensive provision but it also does work from a point of view of those

pupils. … but it's a high cost, both in terms of, well, financial cost and cost to the school (Freshfield)

The headteacher of Merrivale, one of the most disadvantaged schools in our sample, talks of the high level of staffing needed:

> So we have a Behaviour Manager, full-time in the school, supported by two Level 3 teaching assistants who work as on-call support. We have another member of staff working in the internal exclusion room, so that's full-time. And we have two teaching assistants trained in emotional literacy, so that's to combat behaviour. (Merrivale)

Some schools found that they were no longer able to dedicate the space or staff for this kind of provision:

> We used to have a teacher who worked with children out of class – but now there's no money for it so we've had to cut it except for the most serious circumstances. So now it's a desk outside the principal's room. The support isn't there anymore. The pressure on education in terms of finance is a real problem. (Ysgol Glan).

The demand for the space and professional support to work with pupils that are 'at risk' of exclusion is likely to reflect their 'situated context'.

Situated context
As Braun *et al.* (2011: 588) explain, situated factors are those aspects of the school which reflect their historic and geographic circumstances – such as the school's reputation and catchment area. They can determine the relative popularity of the school, and the extent to which it is over- or under-subscribed. The Welsh Government Guidance (WG 2019) strongly advocates the use of 'managed moves' as an alternative to exclusion, where a pupil is offered a place at another school. Merrivale, which as we have already noted is one of the more disadvantaged schools, found itself to be the recipient of students relocated in this way. As the headteacher explains:

> Local Authority Officers are persuading the parents … 'Well, you're… you're on the verge of permanent exclusion. Why don't you try going to Merrivale?" So, you know, we've taken a couple of children like that from other schools … We don't have any say at all, because we're under capacity. We don't have the right to refuse. … The two schools in Westshire, Merrivale and Westville, with the highest deprivation have the most challenging children, and both are under capacity.

External context

In addition to historic and geographic circumstances, schools are also variously able to draw on external support, such as local authority guidance and provision. Local authorities engage with schools with the aim of reducing the number of exclusions. As the headteachers of Freshfield and Merrivale confirm, local authorities co-ordinate the 'managed moves' of pupils 'at risk' of exclusion:

> That's like a permanent exclusion. But the way the LA does them, they don't have a permanent exclusion on their record. The LA manages their exit out of here and then tries to get them into another school. (Freshfield)

> … it's quite clear that where somebody is on the verge of it, the Local Authority will step in and persuade the parents to take their child to another school. (Merryvale)

However, some local authorities appear to be better placed to do this than others:

> There isn't always someone managing this process in the Council – so the schools need to work together on this instead. We need to know what the wider situation is across the [local authority] to know where they could be moved. (Ysgol Glan)

Local authorities also vary in their capacity to offer support and alternative provision:

> We've got a pupil referral unit [in this authority]. But the unit is closing. Well, the KS3 unit is not running at the moment. So obviously students somehow need to be managed by schools … I'm not too sure of the ins and outs … I presume there's a financial reason behind it. As well as a capacity staffing issue (Portside)

The headteacher at Ysgol Llyn Du reported how they no longer had access to an educational psychologist because their local authority had failed to appoint one, so instead they used one of their learning coaches to fill in:

> They have advertised a few times, but we just don't have them now because there's nobody employed to do it … it's been three years now that they've been trying to fill that position. A youth worker, she comes in for one lunch time once a week. And we have a counsellor who comes in one day a week. I can't call her a counsellor but that effectively is what she does, her correct title is 'learning coach'.

Lack of external specialist Welsh language support can be a particular problem for Welsh medium schools in non-Welsh speaking areas, as the headteacher of Penpentre comments:

> We don't have the resources to do this. There's not much money. We spend on some extra external schemes but don't have money for a behaviour unit .... But problem is knowing that there isn't anything else out there for them if they don't succeed here. (Penpentre)

So while local authorities in Wales have been given a key role to play in helping schools reduce exclusions, some of them are also struggling financially. As the headteacher of Portside comments:

> It's the kind of support structures for those more serious cases really when your authorities are under increasing pressure regarding funding. Schools are under increasing pressure regarding funding. Schools are under pressure regarding inclusion. So there's a balance between an inclusive education and dealing with the more serious issues. But then when there's a funding issue and a lack of resources and there's no capacity to deal with these young adults, then obviously it becomes increasingly more difficult for the school. (Portside)

These increasing pressures can lead to unintended consequences, as schools struggle to reduce exclusions with limited resources and local authority support to support 'at-risk' pupils.

Unintended consequences

As discussed above, schools' capacity to 'manage' student behaviour varies widely and depends not only on professional values, but on material resources and support both inside and outside the school. It should also be clear from the headteachers that some of the strategies they have put in place may fall short of a *formal* exclusion but are still a *form* of exclusion. The students may still be on the school register, but they are not in the classroom. And while some schools have the resources to provide valuable learning outside the classroom, others do not (Power & Taylor 2020).

We do not know the scale and consequences of these kind of exclusionary practices, but it is probable that they will become more common when there is increased pressure not to exclude. As Munn et al. (2000: 76) argue 'if pressure is placed on schools to reduce formal exclusion we can anticipate an increase in informal exclusion and in internal exclusions'.

As our local authority respondent acknowledges, using official rates of exclusion as a factor in the categorisation of schools can lead to 'creative' responses by schools:

> You've got to look at the drivers there and what are the drivers for schools, and obviously bringing down exclusions, improving attendance and improving attainment .... there are unintended consequences. And so when headteachers are being called to

account, and with categorisation ... there are drivers there that will compel schools to do certain things. (LAO)

Certainly, our respondent working in the third sector organisation that supports vulnerable and 'at-risk' children and young people spoke of the dangers of driving exclusions down through external accountability mechanisms:

There's been an awful lot of targeted support across Wales to reduce permanent exclusions and they have reduced hugely ... Generally, the push from the Welsh Government about reducing permanent exclusions has worked. There's no doubt about that. It has worked. And it is high on the agenda. But it has opened the doors to other things, such as that internal exclusion. (TSO)

In particular, she referred to the increasing use of supposedly 'elective' home education as an increasingly common strategy for reducing school exclusions:

There's a higher level of elective home education and the parents would argue that it's not elective, it's something they're forced into doing because the provision was inappropriate in schools ... that they've got one of the highest, probably the highest, level of elective home education or at least withdrawing children from provision, could be the fudge here – that they don't have exclusions because the parents are already hauling them out. (TSO)

These kinds of practices may be the unintended consequences of the Welsh Government's drive to reduce exclusions. Ironically, it is probable that building targets around exclusions is only likely to mask various practices, make them less visible, and actually prevent more effective targeted resources and structures being made available.

Conclusion
We began this paper from the claim that Wales has been relatively successful in driving down rates of school exclusion – at least when compared with England. It might be tempting to assume that this success is attributable to Wales' political and educational priorities, which are very different from those which prevail in England. If one examines the discourse influencing social policy, including education in general, and school exclusions in particular, Wales appears to stand in stark contrast to that emanating from England. Wales frames the issue of school exclusions within a rights-based perspective. The emphasis is on understanding the causes of student disengagement and on wellbeing, rather than on discipline and behaviour management.

However, if one moves away from the contexts of political influence and text production, and into the context of practice, a different picture emerges. It is clear from the headteachers we interviewed that some schools are much better placed than others to provide support for 'at-risk' students and appear to have access to resources (human and physical) to manage them internally. The data presented here indicate that factors that enable schools to retain these students are related both to the school's internal attributes and external cirumstances. However, it should also be noted that these indications derive from the accounts of headteachers alone and from only twelve schools. What is needed is a more systemic exploration of the relatve significance of the factors associated with reducing exclusions in different contexts and for different kinds of school.

It is also clear from the interviews reported here that the retention of 'difficult' students within the school often entails exclusion from the mainstream classroom and placement in some kind of on-site isolation unit. Unfortunately, we just don't know how widespread these kinds of practices are because they are undocumented. Far more research needs to be done on the frequency and nature of exclusion from the mainstream classroom. And while keeping a student on the school register may be a better alternative than an official exclusion, it seems unlikely that the student will receive the same quality of learning experience in these isolation units. Again, it will be important that future research gathers data on the student experience of this form of internal exclusion and looks at the consequences for educational progression.

Although extremely difficult to research because of their hidden, and potentially illegal, nature, we need to discover the extent of less visible forms of school exclusion, such as 'off-rolling' and 'non-elective' home education. Until we are able to get an indication of the scale of these unofficial forms of exclusion, we will not be to tell whether political pressure on schools to reduce exclusions is beneficial or detrimental to inclusive education as a whole.

We hope that this paper has shown that policy matters, and that the values that prevail in the context of influence are important. However, it also shows that if exclusionary practices – whether they count as school exclusions or not – are to be reduced – it is likely that policy makers will need to do more to address the often unacknowledged conditions in which schools and their local authorities struggle, and recognise that policy pressures to drive down exclusions may simply lead to undocumented and hidden exclusionary practices.

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