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School exclusion policies across the UK: convergence and divergence

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ABSTRACT



Previous comparative research has revealed recent high and rising school exclusion rates in England and a contrasting picture of much lower and reducing rates in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In this paper, we examine findings from new research into school exclusion policies across the four countries of the UK. This interrogates for the first time how the problem of 'school exclusion' is framed within these four distinct policy contexts. We take up the question of how policy levers and drivers may shape patterns and trends in permanent exclusion and suspension/temporary exclusion. This analysis reveals that, despite broad agreement in policy on a need to reduce exclusion and increase equity across the UK jurisdictions, there are diverging policy stances on the purposes of exclusion, responsibilities of schools and the role of the state overall in bringing about change. We conclude that deeper critical engagement with policy contexts is a vital element in understanding the persistence of school exclusion itself but also the differential rates of exclusion across the UK.

KEYWORDS

Comparative analysis; school exclusion/suspension/expulsion; education policy; disadvantage

Introduction

Experience of school exclusion does not fall evenly across the four jurisdictions of the UK. Differential rates of permanent exclusion and short-term suspension have long featured in official national level statistics collated across the UK, but our work within the Excluded Lives project has been the first to offer a detailed comparative analysis (Cole et al., 2019). This revealed a deteriorating situation in England, with alarming and rapidly rising rates of formal exclusion and suspension, and a contrasting picture of much lower rates in neighbouring Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Daniels et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2021, 2020; McCluskey et al., 2019; Power & Taylor 2020; Duffy et al., 2021). At the time of writing, the rates of exclusion and suspension in England have risen steeply once again (DfE, 2023a,

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2024a). Politically, economically and socially, the four jurisdictions of the UK have very close relations, but in the last 25 years, devolution has seen the much smaller jurisdictions of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales progressively emphasise the distinctiveness of their individual policy frameworks in education. Our study therefore aimed to explore whether diverging policy on school exclusion in these four contexts could offer an explanation for their differing rates of exclusion.

Experience of school exclusion does not fall evenly across the school population. For example, although the largest number of excludees comes from white British backgrounds, it continues to be the case that disproportionately high rates of exclusion are seen among, for example, young men aged 13–15, those who are care experienced, have an additional need or disability, live in families affected by ill health, poverty, trauma, bereavement or loss, or who are of Black Caribbean, Gypsy, Roma or Irish Traveller heritage (see, for example, the Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019). Furthermore, the risk of exclusion is known to increase significantly where these identities and circumstances intersect; there are, for example, well-known associations between exclusion and a range of serious negative impacts, including poor academic outcomes (Keppens, 2023), poor mental health (Obsuth et al., 2024), social exclusion in adulthood (Madia et al., 2022), increased risks of offending and victimisation (McAra & McVie, 2022), increased susceptibility to exploitation (Temple, 2020), and further social and economic inequalities (Daniels et al., 2022). Power and Taylor (2020) remind us, too, that exclusion is significant not only for the individual pupil or local school community but also because it may act as ‘a “barometer” of the social inclusiveness of an education system as a whole ...’ and that rising rates of exclusion can be ‘... symptomatic of an education system in crisis’ (Power & Taylor, 2020, pp. 1–2). The Covid-19 pandemic, an era of financial austerity and the current cost of living crisis in the UK are likely to further deepen that sense of crisis.

It seems surprising, therefore, that there is a dearth of research into the different legislative and policy landscapes of the four UK jurisdictions and how they may contribute to experiences and outcomes of exclusion. We were concerned to address this important gap in the literature, and to advance understanding of the differences, in light of the known risks and negative consequences of exclusion overall and its disproportionate impact on marginalised and minoritised groups of young people already known to be disenfranchised in, and by, schooling.

This paper represents findings from one aspect of the four-year multi-disciplinary, multi-site programme of research, ‘The political economies of school exclusion and their consequences’, funded by the ESRC (2019–2024). More information on the overarching study is available at <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FS015744%2F1>. It received ethical approval from the University of Oxford in December 2019 and from the University of Edinburgh in January 2020.

The work underpinning this paper was undertaken as part of one strand of this overall research study. Specifically, here we were interested to examine how the problem of ‘exclusion’ is represented, and how formal exclusion processes explained and rationalised, within the four distinct legislative and policy frameworks in the UK. The analysis aims to make sense of dominant discourses, influences and, in places, lacunae in policy on exclusion. This is both urgent and essential if we are to understand and challenge asymmetric experiences of educational experience and the long-term consequences of poor school outcomes for individuals, local communities and society.

The study starts from the premise that national policy is shaped by and shapes historical, political, economic and social contexts. Policy does not emerge in a vacuum but represents an accumulation, an aggregation, of discourses. As Stephen Ball reminds us:

policies themselves, the texts, are (a) not necessarily clear or closed or complete. The texts are the product of compromises at various stages (at points of initial influence, in the micro-politics of legislative formulation, in the parliamentary process and in the politics and micropolitics of interest group articulation). (Ball, 1993, p. 11)

In terms of school exclusion, policy simultaneously creates and reflects beliefs about necessary and effective responses to young people's behaviour, school discipline, the rights and duties of schools and of families, and the importance, or not, of pursuing equalities of opportunity, experience and outcome. With Foucault, we view discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (Foucault, 1977, p. 49). Our aims, therefore, were to expose the underwiring of policy documentation; to tease out the warp and weft of policy wording in these four jurisdictions; to problematise taken for granted assumptions lying within attempts to 'solve the problem' of exclusion and in so doing to more fully understand any relationship between policy and differing rates of exclusion.

Methods

The search for a methodological framework for this analysis began by revisiting previous work undertaken by two members of the research group (Tawell and McCluskey 2022) in which we adopted Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach. We found that her explicit commitment to social justice and systematic question-framing worked well in exploration of 'the taken-for-granted assumptions that lodge in government policies and policy proposals' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xv); likewise, her argument that 'there are no problems separate from the proposals purported to address them' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 15); and, following Foucault, that policies can be understood as governing strategies in themselves. However, our experience of Bacchi's framework (Tawell and McCluskey 2022) meant we had some reservations about the feasibility of doing so with fidelity in the current larger and more complex analysis. We turned therefore to Hyatt's (2013) systematic but very practical critical policy analysis framework, which seemed to us to be based on many of the same values and principles. Hyatt's detailed discussion of key aspects of contextualisation of policy and equally granular discussion of deconstruction as applied in an education policy context gave confidence in its applicability and feasibility for our purposes. Our analysis in the end, therefore, was guided by Hyatt's notions of *policy drivers*: 'the intended aims or goals of a policy' (2013, p. 838) and *policy levers*: aids to policy drivers, tools which 'the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change' borrowed from Steer et al. (2007, p. 177).

We then worked to develop a protocol to assist in this cross-jurisdictional analysis, which is now described below.

Inclusion criteria:

- Time period: 1997–2022, identifying moments of political significance for school exclusion policy: the forming of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in England in 2010, the pro-devolution referenda in Scotland and Wales in 1997, and Northern Ireland in 1998.
- Sources: Government policy documents (Green and White Papers), consultations and ministerial speeches; legislation and statutory guidance; relevant court and tribunal decisions; ministerial statements; guidance for parents and children and young people; press releases and website statements; and relevant media coverage. Also, reports, etc., on school exclusion published by relevant, influential non-governmental organisations.
- Jurisdiction level sources.
- Sources focused at two levels including (i) specific focus on school exclusion (formal and informal, legal and unlawful), (ii) more broadly on schools, behaviour management, alternative provision (AP) and additional learning needs/additional support needs/special needs where this relates to exclusion.
- Relating to secondary school only.
- Definition of school exclusion dependent on jurisdiction. To include legal, technical terms and terms used to describe informal or illegal forms of school exclusion.

Exclusion criteria:

- Local authority level guidance and reports.
- Peer-reviewed empirical/theoretical articles in academic journals.

This search strategy allowed for differences in the political economies of the four jurisdictions but always maintaining a common focus on:

- (i) Technical terms for legal forms of school exclusion: school exclusion, temporary/ fixed-term/-period exclusion, permanent exclusion, suspension.
- (ii) Terms for informal or illegal forms of school exclusion: ‘sending home’, ‘seclusion’, ‘suspension’, ‘expulsion’, ‘managed moves’, ‘off-rolling’, ‘internal exclusions’, ‘flexible timetables/part-time timetables’ (Scotland).
- (iii) Key related terms: alternative provision, pupil referral unit/alternative education settings, behaviour and discipline, additional support for learning, additional support needs/special educational needs and disabilities or equivalent.

The protocol also took into account that some, but not all, sources were common to all four jurisdictions: House of Commons Library, Hansard, Educational Committees, Digital Education Resource Archive, British Document Summary Service, non-governmental organisations (e.g. Children’s Commissioner, Children in England/Scotland/Wales/NI).

We developed a template for reporting so that each jurisdiction would present a summary of sources using the same structure. However, political features of the different jurisdictional contexts were reflected in the choice of documents analysed for each jurisdiction. So, for example, in England the final dataset consisted almost entirely of

government and Education Committee publications, while the Northern Ireland dataset included key documents from the third sector. The full dataset in this analysis eventually comprised 55 documents from England, 34 from Scotland, 58 from Northern Ireland and 40 from Wales.

The initial coding and analysis process took place over spring and early summer 2021, aided by discussion across the four jurisdictional teams, by a small pilot study, and with regular team meetings to devise and refine search terms, and provide checks on reliability and accuracy (Cho, 2011). Each team screened and marked each source under the relevant category: (i) specific focus on school exclusion, (ii) schools, behaviour management, alternative provision. An Excel template was used to record resources, identifying category, year of publication and type of source (e.g. White Paper). These templates were regularly cross-checked by the team for accuracy. Perhaps inevitably, and despite the care with which this plan developed, it required revisiting and revision as we worked through the design and then analysis.

Findings

The findings from this process form the basis for the analysis undertaken in this article to integrate, compare and contrast the findings from the different jurisdictions. The analysis generated three broad themes which are discussed in turn below: 1) Policy context and drivers; 2) Policy discourse: convergence, divergence and silence; and 3) Policy levers. While our original study covered a time period up to 2022, we refer at points to more recently introduced policy where this helps to further build on the comparative analysis.

Policy contexts and drivers

In the section which follows, we examine the political ideologies underpinning policy in the four UK jurisdictions, expanding in Table 1 on Power's (2016) succinct summary of the 'clear red water' of contrasting policy discourses in England and Wales. It is important to acknowledge that any such summary over-simplifies a complex set of cultural-political interactions, and that there are difficulties, in particular, with any attempt to describe Northern Ireland in the same terms as the other jurisdictions, given the breaks in government in recent years. Our aim here is formative and exploratory, but recognising the necessity of delineating the key drivers, 'that define the goals of policy, whether expressed

Table 1. Policy contexts and drivers.

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

through official policy documents, ministerial exhortation or statements of government priorities in the mass media, may be taken as cues to action by those who manage and deliver public services' (Steer et al., 2007, p. 177).

England

England is by far the largest jurisdiction in the UK, with a population of 56 million. Northern Ireland has a population of 2 m, Scotland, 5 m and Wales, 3 m. For the 20 years post-devolution England had a left of centre government, but since 2010 has been led by a Conservative government. A commitment to libertarian principles has led to the evolution of a diversified, marketised education system, with a strong element of parental choice and an increasingly strong policy commitment to 'academisation' – schools (academies) which are state funded and run by trusts. Academies do not have to follow a set curriculum and head teachers have a much greater degree of autonomy than their counterparts in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, where schools are generally controlled by local authorities. The freedom to decide on, for example, curriculum, timetables, holidays, appropriate qualifications for teachers, also marks out the English system from the rest of the UK. While there is national exclusions guidance, the political emphasis on competition and market freedoms, coupled with pressure from unofficial school 'league tables', has also weakened systems of accountability. In practice, this means, for example, that a head teacher's decision to exclude is rarely challenged through appeal, and responsibility to find another school for an excluded child often rests with the family rather than the local authority or excluding school. It has also led to a proliferation of alternative provision (AP) outside mainstream schooling, offered by a range of providers.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland voted in favour of devolution in 1998, but policy development has been hampered by frequent suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly since then. This has inevitably had a major impact on exclusion policy and much of the guidance available is now old and outdated (e.g. Department of Education, 1998, 2004, 2014). The exclusion process itself is complex, with multiple expelling authorities depending on school type, and no common, agreed set of exclusion procedures applicable across the jurisdiction. At the same time, and perhaps because of the lengthy suspensions of government, there is a large and proactive children's civil society and community sector, which includes professional associations, legal oversight bodies, charities and non-government organisations and a range of community-based organisations (e.g. Burns et al., 2015), collectively offering advocacy, information and advice to pupils and families on issues related to school exclusion. Crucially, this sector takes on a critical role, querying and challenging the purpose, processes and impact of policy and practices around school exclusion, providing robust advocacy for children, young people and their families and calling for a more holistic, child-centred, rights-based and inclusive education system.

Scotland

Devolution was introduced in Scotland in 1999, under a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. From 2007 until 2021, the jurisdiction was controlled by a majority nationalist government and since then led by a power-sharing agreement between the nationalists

and the Green Party. The overall policy discourse of school exclusions in Scotland emphasises three main aspects: the social causes of school exclusion, the negative consequences of exclusion and the rights of the child, with full incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law in 2024. This context has long been shaped by a commitment to the 'Kilbrandon Principles' which predate devolution by some 30 years and affect how young people's problems are understood. These principles include 'the recognition of the needs of the child as being the first and primary consideration; the vital role of the family in tackling children's problems; and the adoption of a preventive and educational approach to these problems', often summarised as centring on 'needs not deeds' (Asquith, 1995, p. 7). Like Wales, it has also sought to distance itself from the ideologies and policies of the UK Government and focuses on strategies to prevent and reduce the use of exclusion. Like England and Wales, there is a legal framework which applies to all sectors and types of schooling, developed within an overarching holistic children's policy framework, 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (Scottish Government, 2012). Exclusion guidance is aligned with research evidence and is regularly updated to take account of findings from the three-yearly 'Behaviour in Scottish Schools' research.

Wales

Since parliamentary devolution in 1999, the political climate in Wales has developed very differently from that which prevails in England – its economically and politically dominant neighbour. Evidence of Wales' distinctive policy approach can be seen in two pieces of landmark legislation, each of which has a bearing on the discourse framing school exclusions. In 2004, Wales was the first country in the UK formally to adopt the UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989) as the basis of policymaking relating to children and young people. Wales is the first and, so far, only jurisdiction in the UK to appoint a Future Generations Commissioner.¹ Key contributors in shaping the Welsh Government policies on school exclusion also include members of the Labour-controlled Senedd, government-appointed commissioners (the Children's Commissioner for Wales, in addition to the Future Generations Commissioner), government-funded but independent organisations such as Estyn (the education and training inspectorate for Wales) and the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. The Welsh Government also commissions evidence from various third-sector organisations concerned with supporting marginalised young people (e.g. Samaritans 2019, SNAP Cymru, 2011) and trades unions. In addition to seeking advice from interest groups within Wales, the Welsh Government has also typically looked to similar small countries for inspiration and evidence to inform policy. In relation to education in general, and to school exclusions in particular, Scotland in particular has been held up as an exemplar. This very brief summary begins to highlight the differences and similarities in contexts and shaping influences of cultural and political history in policy formation, which are explored in more depth below, as we now turn to a discussion of the findings on policy discourse, convergences and divergences, and policy levers.

Policy discourse: convergence, divergence and silence

In this section, we integrate and compare and contrast findings from analysis of the policy contexts in the four jurisdictions, based on three broad sub-themes: a) policy

Table 2. Exclusion policy discourse across the UK: convergence, divergence, silence.

Convergence	Divergence	Silence
Commitment to reduce exclusions and increase equity	Policy approaches and priorities for young people with social, emotional and behavioural problems	Aims and effectiveness of school exclusion as a process
Most commonly recorded reasons for use of exclusion process	Differential emphasis on prevention or reactive intervention	Disproportionalities in exclusion rates
Use of exclusion processes for relatively minor reasons	Differential emphasis on collaborative professional working between schools and e.g. educational psychology services	Voices of young people and families, especially those living in poor socio-economic circumstances
Head teachers' reluctance to exclude	Commissioning and governance of education systems	
Reframing or legitimisation of exclusion as beneficial or preventative	Use of research evidence to underpin policy development	
Use of internal/informal exclusions – often also framed as beneficial or preventative	Policy formation processes	
Disproportionality in exclusion rates e.g. gender, socio-economic status, cultural heritage, child exploitation, family trauma, bereavement or loss, family physical and mental health, low levels of academic achievement	Alignment with UNCRC	
Concern about the impacts of class disruption on learning, safety and wellbeing of the generality of pupils		

convergences, b) divergences, and c) silences: places where we might expect there to be a standpoint or explicit priority, but where there seems to be a gap instead. [Table 2](#) illustrates key similarities and differences in institutional processes and where our analysis revealed similarities and differences across the UK.

Previous work by two of the current paper's authors examined the differences between school exclusion policies in England and Scotland (Tawell & McCluskey, 2022). We were able to demonstrate how pupil behaviour is represented differently in policy in these two jurisdictions. We found that in Scotland, challenging behaviour is represented as potentially resulting from unmet needs, and that a holistic, welfare-based approach focused on prevention and intervention permeated policy more deeply in Scotland than in England. We voiced a concern that 'English policy may limit the capacity of schools to approach discipline in proactive ways' and that, 'while the English guidance explains how to do school exclusion, in terms of the legal process, unlike the Scottish guidance, it does not provide advice on how to do early intervention or prevent exclusions' (Tawell & McCluskey, 2022, p. 140). Expanding this analysis to include Northern Ireland and Wales has highlighted further differences. In the 40 Welsh documents included in the current study, there are 1000+ references to 'rights' and more than 200 references to the UNCRC. In the key Welsh Government guidance on exclusion for local authorities and schools, the UNCRC is referenced 10 times. In Scotland and Wales there is consensus over the social and economic causes of behaviour of the kind that leads to exclusion, and explicit recognition of the deleterious consequences of exclusion, often supported in relevant policy documents by reference to empirical research studies (e.g. Scottish Government, 2017). This recognition of underlying causes is more muted in the relevant English policy

guidance and largely missing in the Northern Ireland guidance, which can both be characterised by a more legalistic and procedural discourse and greater emphasis on how to ensure exclusion process is lawful, rather than how to prevent the need for exclusion. Although not the subject of this paper, it would be interesting to examine more closely the influence of different processes of policy formation across the UK. Scotland and Wales have tended to build policy based on consultative, ongoing relationships with professional associations and trades unions, whereas policymaking in England relies less on such collaborations, perhaps partly because of its size, but also perhaps due to political ideology, as described in the preceding section.

While it is important to attend to areas of difference, the areas of convergence are equally worthy of attention. As noted above, the rates of exclusion across the UK vary substantially. In England exclusion levels have been high and rising (DfE, 2023a, 2024b), whereas in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, rates are lower and reducing (Cole et al., 2019; Daniels et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2021; McCluskey et al., 2019; Power & Taylor, 2020). One of the central aims of this paper is to interrogate how policy comes to define 'what the problem is represented to be' (Bacchi, 2009), and to understand the role this may have in these statistics. It is interesting therefore to note that all four jurisdictions continue to permit the use of school exclusion, setting the UK at odds with much of Northern Europe. All four set out an explicit commitment to reduce exclusions and to manage exclusion processes with care and attention to the rights of the child. Our analysis also indicates that head teachers generally share a reluctance to exclude pupils, though this is often in tension with a concern for the learning, wellbeing and safety of the 'other 29 in the class', the generality of pupils. The most commonly recorded reason for exclusion in each of the four jurisdictions is very similar. In England and Wales, this is termed 'persistent and disruptive behaviour', in Northern Ireland, 'persistent infringement of rules', in Scotland, 'general or persistent disobedience'. We also note that all four make use of informal exclusion and alternatives to exclusion, and although governance structures vary, many in schools explain the use of alternatives as necessary to prevent a worsening of outcomes (Mills & Thomson, 2023). Perhaps the most concerning areas of similarity are in the levels of disproportionality in exclusion figures. Disturbingly, despite significant reductions in rates of exclusion in the devolved jurisdictions, and the large body of research emphasising the negative impacts of harsh discipline including exclusion (see, for example, the Timpson Review, 2019), over-representation of some minoritised and marginalised groups of young people in exclusion figures still persists across all four jurisdictions. Indeed, the welcome reduction in the use of exclusion in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has in some ways unmasked the intransigence of disproportionality as a feature of school exclusion.

Finally, we turn to the silences in policy and draw attention to three significant concerns: a) the widespread and largely unquestioned acceptance of the need to maintain the option for schools to officially exclude pupils across the UK, despite a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of this sanction; b) the unevenness of policy interest in tackling entrenched over-representation of some groups in exclusion figures, despite overwhelming evidence of the impacts for those excluded (Ayoub et al., 2020; Gerlinger et al., 2021; LiCalsi et al., 2021; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Madia et al., 2022; McAra & McVie, 2022; Quin, 2017; Umeh et al., 2020), and, increasingly, for high excluding schools themselves (Huang & Cornell, 2021; Jabbari & Johnson, 2023; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2019;

Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Perry & Morris, 2014); and c) that the voices of young people directly affected by exclusion are still largely missing from policy development, despite commitment to the UNCRC in three of the four jurisdictions.

In their recent article Power and Taylor (2023) examine the ‘incongruities’, ‘silences and tensions’ inherent in school exclusion policy in one jurisdictional context, Wales, but with implications for many other countries in which exclusion is still lawful. They note, for example, the silence on how to balance the competing rights of the excluded pupil and other members of a school community; the lack of a robust body of evidence on the effectiveness of alternatives to exclusion; the tension between an emphasis on children’s rights and the use of the exclusion process itself; and ‘a significant mismatch between the causes of exclusions and the proposed remedies’ in education (Power & Taylor, 2023, p. 1).

Overall, these findings serve to highlight convergence, divergence and significant gaps in the debate precisely where, we would argue, proactive, evidence-based policy should be able to bring about positive change. We return to this central question below but before doing so conclude the discussion of findings with reflections on policy levers.

Policy levers

In this final part of our discussion of findings, we reflect on analysis of the ‘governing instruments’ (Kooiman, 2003) that ‘the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change and which act as policy levers’ (Steer et al., 2007, p. 177). Steer et al. underline the impact of the shift to ‘policy steering’ in the English context in recent times, referring to ‘the processes whereby national governments have withdrawn from direct control over the administration of public services and have increasingly used a range of different levers to steer policy’ (2007, p. 176).

A clear example of arm’s length policy steering in England can be seen in the strengthening of head teacher authority over time. In terms of exclusion, this has had a direct impact on, for example, the rights of appeal. The Education Act (2011) revoked the power of panels to direct reinstatement so that while a headteacher’s decision to exclude would be reviewed, it could not be overturned (Education Act, 2011). In general, rights of appeal are rarely exercised in any of the four jurisdictions, although there is a tribunal system in the smaller jurisdictions and a right to appeal rather than just review.

Other levers at the disposal of all four governments often shape the contexts within which exclusion happens rather than being directly aimed at the exclusion process itself. These include school inspection regimes, and targeted funding to raise overall attainment and to tackle poverty-related attainment gaps. Such initiatives and funding flows aim to support many of the same pupils who may be at risk of exclusion.

A key lever in all four UK jurisdictions is provided by national school inspection teams, and scrutiny of exclusion figures forms an integral part of any school inspection. In Scotland, the inspection regimes were strongly criticised in an OECD report (2021) for being cumbersome and overly complicated, though it is not yet clear how any new structures may affect oversight of exclusion. In England, the inspection framework was updated in 2019 (Ofsted, 2019) and a new section aimed at tackling ‘off-rolling’ (the practice of removing struggling pupils from the school roll so that their exam results cannot negatively affect a school’s standing; Long & Denechi, 2019) was added. The increased focus on children missing from school (which may include children who do

not return to schooling following an exclusion) is also reflected in the addition of 'Including Pupil Movement' to the school exclusion statutory guidance (DfE, 2023b). Off-rolling is not a feature of the Scottish and Northern Irish school systems, and its use in Wales seems to be minimal, perhaps because there is still more direct control of schools by the public sector in these jurisdictions. The DfE in England itself has expressed concern that:

Schools, trusts and local authorities have unclear – and often overlapping – roles and responsibilities. Unclear expectations of academies and local authorities permit grey areas which have sometimes allowed vulnerable children to fall through the gaps. Government has not been able to intervene adequately. (DfE, 2022, p. 46)

The legal and policy guidance in all four jurisdictions makes clear that formal procedures must be followed and that exclusion should be used as a last resort (DfE, 2023b; Scottish Government, 2017; Welsh Government, 2019). In England, the guidance recommends alternatives to exclusion such as 'internal exclusion' and 'managed moves', but these, along with exclusion and direction to AP, are still described as 'essential behaviour management tools for headteachers and can be used to establish high standards of behaviour in schools and maintain the safety of school communities' (DfE, 2023b, p. 30). Whilst Wales recommends the use of internal exclusion and managed moves (Welsh Government, 2019), it shares with Scotland a much clearer policy emphasis on prevention and whole school relational approaches which build staff and pupil resilience, aimed at reducing the use of exclusion (Scottish Government, 2017):

... 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 ... This refreshed guidance gives a stronger focus on approaches that can be used to prevent the need for exclusion, ensuring all children and young people are Included, Engaged and Involved in their education. (Scottish Government, 2017, foreword)

There is limited national level guidance on how best to support young people at risk of exclusion in Northern Ireland and, as noted earlier, much of it is outdated, legalistic and procedural in nature (Department of Education, 1998, 2001). Finally, initiatives in England such as AP Taskforces (DfE & Ford, 2021) are also being trialled in AP settings in response to concerns over the links between school exclusion and child criminal exploitation. While the aim of these multi-agency teams is to work preventatively, it could be argued that by being based in AP settings they are still working downstream, rather than providing upstream early intervention.

Conclusions

This paper began by questioning whether policy shapes exclusion statistics in the UK. It has examined findings from an in-depth analysis of the distinct policy contexts in the four jurisdictions of the UK and highlighted three aspects of these policies which may help us understand the wide variation of exclusion rates across the UK and the persistently high rates of exclusion in England. These are a) policy contexts and drivers; b) significant areas of convergence, divergence and silences in the four policy arenas; and c) the work of policy levers in these different arenas. The examination of contexts drew attention to policy drivers in England, with its Conservative

commitment to diversification, an ethic of competition, equality of opportunity, cultural restoration, and minimising of government control, and contrasting this with the emphasis in Scotland and Wales on an ethic of co-operation, universalism and equality of outcomes. It was often challenging here and throughout the analysis overall to provide meaningful comparison with Northern Ireland, given the lengthy periods of suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but we did note the shaping influence of collective pressure on government from children's civil society/community organisations.

Building on this examination of contexts, the analysis then moved to consider policy convergences, divergences and silences in depth. It would be all too easy for the smaller UK jurisdictions to engage in critique of rising exclusion rates in England, and to miss the potential lessons learned from these findings, which indicate that there are striking similarities in many policy approaches across all four jurisdictions: a continuing absence of any tangible change based on listening to the views of young people, the still minimal attention given to the role of parents and families, and the over-representation of some disadvantaged groups and communities in exclusion statistics; and this in the face of a robust body of evidence on the negative effects of exclusion, and even in countries where exclusion rates have decreased markedly over time overall. Given this convergence in policy, we ask whether this may help explain or affect the persistent over-representation of some disadvantaged groups and communities in shorter term exclusion statistics across the UK.

Finally, the analysis turned to discussion of the levers of policy and noting the emphasis in England on arms' length regulation in contrast to the direct control of public services which is still the norm in the other jurisdictions. We noted differences in the framing of guidance – more legalistic in England and Northern Ireland – and in the priority given to a focus on individualised (England) or whole-school initiatives (Scotland and Wales); on pupil behaviour (England) vs. whole school ethos and relationships (Scotland and Wales); on proactive (Scotland and Wales) vs. reactive interventions (England); though, arguably, this may be changing in England, in view of the insertion in the most recent statutory guidance of a section on preventative measures to school exclusion (DfE, 2023b, p. 19) and links made in that section to other strategies for initial interventions in the new Behaviour in Schools guidance (DfE, 2024a).

This study and the findings presented in this article identify a pressing need to revisit policy on exclusions. They reinforce the argument that policy matters, and that there is a need to uncover its workings in order to deepen understanding of jurisdictional differences. The study found the twin concepts of policy drivers: 'the intended aims or goals of a policy' from Hyatt (2013, p. 838) and policy levers: tools which 'the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change' (Steer et al., 2007, p. 177) provided a helpful way to distinguish between these similarities and differences, convergences and divergences which, it is now concluded, contribute to an explanation of differential rates of exclusion across the UK.

However, it is also important to draw attention to findings which point to convergence in key areas of policy, and to raise an equally important question therefore as to whether, or to what extent, convergence in policy may explain, for example, the persistent over-representation of some disadvantaged groups and communities in shorter-term exclusion statistics across the UK. Policy can delineate, it can limit, but it can also expand what is

possible in tackling exclusion and suspension. These findings, and the conclusions drawn, are important in themselves because they shed new light on the role of policy as lever and driver, and also because they help identify sites for essential further empirical study, for further consideration of the similarities as much as the differences in the framing of policy in comparative analysis.

Note

1. Future generations are cohorts of hypothetical people not yet born. Future generations are contrasted with current and past generations and evoked in order to encourage thinking about intergenerational equity.

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Data availability statement

This study is a re-analysis of existing data which are openly available at locations cited in the 'References' section of this paper.

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