

## The unintended consequences of targeted school interventions

*'Well what did I come down here for? Do you not know? I'm a problem child. I have problems behaving. Is there a part of that you don't understand?'*

Clark, aged 11, Mr Drew's School for Boys

*'The stigmatized individual ... may perceive, usually quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really 'accept' him and are not ready to make contact with him on 'equal grounds'.*

Goffman, Stigma, 1963:7

Channel 4 has recently concluded its television series, [Mr Drew's School for Boys](#). The programme observes the eponymous Mr Drew, who originally featured as one of the inspirational teaching staff in [Educating Essex](#), delivering a residential summer school to challenging boys who are struggling to remain in mainstream education. Responding to evidence that [boys are more likely to be excluded from school than girls](#), the programme aims to improve students' behaviour so that they may realise their educational potential. The series has been revered in the media as a [powerful social experiment](#), but Mr Drew and his beleaguered colleagues may have done more harm than good by bringing these boys together in one place for the summer.

There is nothing new about targeting children and young people with 'problems' for intervention and such approaches have a history of being well-intended cures that harm. One of the earliest and most salient examples is the [Cambridge-Somerville Youth study](#), which sought to prevent or lower rates of juvenile delinquency. Undertaken in 1940's America, the study delivered an intervention comprising counsellors who visited the home to support families, summer camps, and connections with community programmes. Thirty year follow up revealed that not only had the intervention been ineffective, it has actually conferred harm to participants. Those in the intervention group were more likely to have committed multiple crimes compared to those not assigned to the programme. The author, [Joan McCord, offered a number of explanations](#), including the stigmatising effect of being labelled as in need of intervention and the process of 'deviancy training', whereby summer camps provided fertile ground for participants to learn deviant activities through the exchange of stories and proffering of advice.

This is not an [isolated example](#). Most recently, a trial of the Young People's Development Programme (YPDP), an intensive one-year holistic programme of education and support for young people aged 13-15 deemed 'at risk' of school exclusion, drug misuse and [teenage pregnancy](#), was found to have done more harm than good. [Evaluation indicated](#) that on completion of this targeted programme young

women actually reported more teenage pregnancy, in addition to a higher expectation of becoming teenage parents. The authors hypothesised that 'negative labelling' was at work here, where identification for participation was not only stigmatising but led to the young women having lower expectations for their own future.

Recent qualitative research I have been involved with progresses the study of targeted interventions and their potential harms. Exploring young people's reaction to being targeted for social and emotional learning interventions in secondary schools in South Wales, the study found a complex set of responses. Stigmatisation was certainly evident, with students interpreting their referral to the intervention as an indication that the schools did not really accept them. However, targeting could also provide a vital resource to students in negotiating their social positioning, as it signified their uncontrollability and anti-school attitudes, both of which were esteemed within the peer group. Meanwhile, identification of problematic students often led to the targeting of pre-existing friendships groups. Participants saw the intervention as an opportunity to enhance these relationships, and would often engage in deviant activities both within and outside of school so that they would have a portfolio of status enhancing anecdotes to share during programme sessions. Yet, for those outside of these intimate friendships groups, a strong feeling of exclusion emerged, which often led to withdrawal from the intervention.

These examples are not intended to suggest that targeting should be completely abandoned, although interventions that select young people in this manner will inevitably fail to address the problem at a population level. Equally, focus on the individual's deficits will generally ensure that the complex and multifaceted social determinants of social, educational and behavioural problems are ignored. Mr Drew's school has been innovative in this regard by educating parents alongside their children throughout the summer school. However, if targeting is to be employed then the process, from identification to execution, needs to be carefully crafted and coordinated. Without this, the risk of well-meaning interventions having long term negative consequences for Clark, his peers, and other 'problem children', is a very real one.

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