The phenomenon of 'off-rolling' in English state maintained schools which is widening the social divide.

In my last blog 'Papering over the cracks in the system in English school system', published at the end of March, I hinted that some schools and multi-school organisations were exploiting the state school system by conveniently placing challenging students into alternative provision so their attainment outcomes (generally lower) did not damage the headline performance figures. In other words, such organisations had found ways to deal only with students who would enhance overall performance in terms of attainment and reputation. This objective, I argued, could be achieved in many ways, but especially through the removal of troublesome students through a process of 'off-rolling'. Sadly, this process has been shown to be on the rise and is now one which is becoming a matter of grave concern, leading to a close focus from the state education system on how alternative provision is being (mis)used when seeking to establish and maintain performance outcomes that are deemed acceptable in a high stakes accountability environment.

A very recent research report by two of my colleagues 'Hierarchy, Markets and Networks' attracted headlines and major coverage in national newspapers as it appeared to demonstrate that high performing and improving schools are accepting fewer children from poor backgrounds. In fact, the Sunday Observer headline was: 'Tory education revolution has fuelled inequality in our schools' when reporting on the key findings from a four-year investigation. The system was now pushing schools and their heads to prioritise "the interests of the school over the interests of particular groups of, usually more vulnerable children", with some schools being found to be engaged in "aggressive marketing campaigns and 'cream-skimming' aimed at recruiting particular types of students". The full report can be accessed via the hyperlink above, but for this blog the key issue is the concept of off-rolling which seems to be decreasing the life chances of children from poor back grounds and widening the social divide in England. So, what is the concept of off-rolling and to what extent is it being witnessed?

'Off-rolling' happens where a student is encouraged off the roll of a mainstream school in an informal exclusion in which the school's best interests have trumped the pupil's. School league tables, broadly speaking, only measure those who remain on the school roll in January of Year 11, giving schools a perverse incentive to lose pupils who would bring results down (Education Datalab). My first foray to establish something more concrete about this phenomenon was in March with an article in my LinkedIn account entitled 'Fixed term exclusions on the rise?', for which I appended the following appropriate photograph:

In the post I cited the [report from the Times Educational Supplement](#) which drew attention to the actions of one academy chain which had been accused of contributing to a "meteoric rise" in exclusions in some of the areas where it operates. That article itself pointed to concerns raised earlier in the year in an [Ofsted report](#) which raised concerns about the high rates of fixed-period exclusions in the North of England. At the time of writing the academy chain was not releasing the figures relating to exclusions, but I argued it did appear that we were seeing concrete evidence of gaming the system by managing the school population. Since then I have done a little more research.

In June of this year [Ofsted published its own blog on 'off-rolling'](#) in which they had analysed data on pupils who leave their state-funded secondary school before the end of key stage 4. Over 19,000 pupils (some 4 per cent of the Year 10 population) did not progress from year 10 to year 11 in the same state-funded secondary school, with only half re-enrolling at another school. Children with special educational needs, children eligible for free school meals, children looked after and some minority ethnic groups were all more likely to leave their school, they reported. Whilst several possible, legitimate reasons were offered, the evidence shows a more than doubling of students with special educational needs who leave their school between years 10 and 11 and more than a quarter of all students that leave their school going to state-funded alternative provision/pupil referral units. The incidence of this possible 'off-rolling' is not evenly spread across the sector, they indicated, with a higher proportion of schools in London seeing movement of pupils compared to other areas of the country. Academies, particularly those in some multi-academy trusts, appear to be losing proportionately more pupils than local authority schools. Conversely, local authority schools seem to be taking on proportionately more pupils.

Pupil movements between year 10 in 2016 and year 11 in 2017
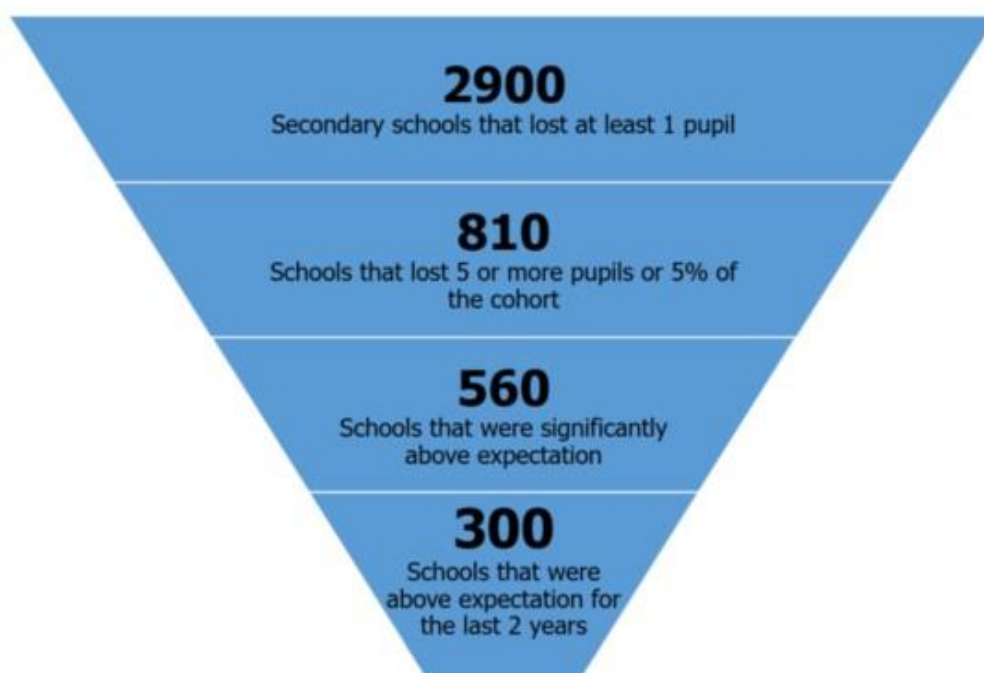
The issue is not related to just the final year of secondary schooling, however, with some 22,000 students leaving mainstream state schools at some point between Year 7 and Year 11 and not being recorded in state education again, most of whom were considered as vulnerable. Education Datalab recognise that some of these students will have moved to independent schools and others will be receiving a broad, effective education through home-schooling estimate. Nevertheless, around 15,400 students were either not recorded as having taken any final key stage examination, or, if they did, whose results did not count towards any establishment. Whilst some 50-60% of this group may have left the English school system by having moved to one of the other home nations, having emigrated, or, in a small number of sad cases, died, it is estimated the other 6,200-7,700 pupils remain in the country who do not have results that counted towards any establishment.

Off-rolling exists, so what should we be doing?

At the time of writing this blog the government is considering several mechanisms to ensure that schools would retain accountability for students they send to alternative provision or exclude, but have stopped short of saying that the changes would go ahead (Education Datalab). Sam Strickland, a serving headteacher, mounts a strong defence of the process of permanent exclusion in his blog of June, 2018, arguing that most "exclusions and the system of checks and balances surrounding them is so stringent that a Head may as well exclude themselves than exclude a student if there is insufficient evidence in place to do so". Nevertheless, he does recognise that it is possible for devious headteachers to utilise the permanent exclusion to enhance their exam result outcomes. Strickland calls for balance and offers a list of non-negotiables that would warrant exclusion.

Perhaps the real problem lies with the impact of high stakes accountability illustrated by Greany & Higham in their report which illustrated increased pressure for schools to perform against measured targets as student level data is used nationally to hold them publicly accountable, allowing the state to continue to steer the system from a distance *and* to increasingly intervene and coerce when and where it deems necessary. The research showed schools reporting a constant need to focus on national exam results and to prepare for the possibility of an Ofsted inspection. Many headteachers argued that this now demands greater consistency and self-policing, with more than three-quarters (77 per cent) of school leaders agreeing with the statement 'making sure my school does well in Ofsted inspections is one of my top priorities'. As a result, they conclude, case study school leaders regularly felt incentivized to prioritise the interests of the school over the interests of certain groups of, usually more vulnerable, children.

My question is – in what ways are such actions subscribing to the comprehensive ideal that was the nation's vision for schooling in the latter part of the previous century? That ideal is perhaps best summed up in the quote from Maurice Holt: "education should be accessible to all pupils regardless of capacity or background, and 'worthwhileness', in that the curriculum

has to be of defensible value so that it enhances the future lives of its students". Where is sustained accountability and a school-led improvement system taking us?

At a personal level I remain shocked at the seemingly callous nature of a school system which repeatedly undermines the life chances of already vulnerable children. My only solution is for all actors to subscribe to the notion of student achievement, rather than merely attainment and provide children with an education (not schooling) that equips them for life. I am still aligned to the four pillars of learning presented in the UNESCO report of 1996 Learning – The treasure within: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be and would love to see them enacted in practice, rather than debated in principle.

I will close this blog with the hopes and aspirations of Edward Timpson who is leading the Department for Education's exclusions review in England:

> No parent sets out on that journey wanting or believing their child will be excluded from school. Yet in 2015/16 the parents of 6,685 children in England faced that realisation. Why?
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> That is the question, amongst others, my review of school exclusions is seeking to address. It isn't about whether we should or shouldn't have school exclusions, as sadly there will always be occasions where, despite being used, as the Secretary of State said, as a last resort, exclusion is the only viable route left to take. It's about understanding not just why in 2015/16 0.08 per cent of children were permanently excluded from state funded schools in England, but why, as the Government's Race Disparity Audit revealed, for some groups of children, including black Caribbean and Gypsy Roma and Traveller children, those with special educational needs, pupils eligible for free school meals, children in need and those in care, the rates of exclusion are much higher. I want to learn too about the approaches schools take to avoid exclusions and support those at risk, such as working with other local schools on managed moves to another local school, which can act as a fresh start with the right support for children at risk of exclusion.
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> That means considering carefully the drivers behind exclusion and looking in depth at current practice. We need to establish how schools and supporting agencies work together in relation to exclusions and whether (or not) it is effective in improving outcomes for those children.

Perhaps he could start by making sure making sure that schools focus more on the success, happiness, well-being and future capability of its student population as adults than whether it does well in Ofsted inspections. What do you think?