Educational Psychology Research and Practice
Volume 7, Issue 2, 2021

Rocks and Hard Places: Exploring Educational Psychologists' Perspectives on "Off-Rolling" or Illegal Exclusionary Practices in Mainstream Secondary Schools in England

Elizabeth J. Done[1], Helen Knowler[2], Will Shield[2], and Hannah Baynton[2]
[1]Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth
[2]Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter

Research being undertaken by the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth is exploring educational psychologists' knowledge of, and perspectives on, exclusionary practices in schools in England, particularly illegal practices referred to as "off-rolling". Preliminary findings from the survey element of a mixed methods research project are reported here. The role of business models in the provision of educational psychology services to schools is considered through the conceptual lens of Giroux, Agamben and Ball to highlight ambiguities around the client relationship and to recast individualised ethical dilemmas as systemic features that inhibit direct challenges to school practices relating to inclusion. It is suggested that traded and privatised services risk implicating educational psychologists in schools' management of the (in)visibility of "off-rolling" and the manufactured legitimacy of varied exclusionary practices.

Keywords: school exclusion, professional ethics, neoliberalisation, disproportionality

Introduction

Educational psychologists (EPs) within the English state-maintained school sector are routinely consulted by schools in diagnostic and assessment processes or through requests for guidance on support for particular students. However, the "traded service" status of educational psychology whereby schools "buy in" EP expertise, combined with growing awareness of disproportionality in exclusionary school practices, raises concerns around the professional ethos and practice of EPs who, not unlike schools in the state-maintained sector, are caught up in broader neoliberal logics of marketisation (Giroux, 2010, p. 185) and performativity (Ball, 2003). On this account, like other education professionals, EPs are socially produced as neoliberal subjects that must remain attentive to market pressures but are not conceptualised as devoid of agentic capacity. This matters as such pressures should be acknowledged if a nuanced understanding of EPs' role in off-rolling or other exclusionary practices is to be fully understood. Mahdi (2020, p. 1) lists the core "moral principles" that inform EP practice as "social justice, beneficence and autonomy", whereas Williams' (2020) consideration of persistent structural inequities undermines the credibility of this liberal humanist orientation and highlights the role of neoliberal discourse in obscuring systemic inequity.

In poststructuralist thought, neoliberalising processes include the responsibilisation of individuals for the market-driven choices (personal and professional) that they make (Foucault, 1982). Liberal utilitarianism, as outlined by Mahdi (2020), is rejected as the principle of the "greater good" provides a rationale at school level for discriminatory and exclusionary practices (Done, Knowler, & Armstrong, 2021). Arguably, "autonomy" (Mahdi, 2020, p. 1) means that EPs choosing not to challenge the exclusionary practices that sustain structural inequity are tacitly endorsing this utilitarian principle. Yet, it is this principle which underpins the ideological and normative concept of "regular" schooling (Power & Taylor, 2020) that schools mobilise as a justification for removing children from mainstream classrooms (Done, Knowler, & Armstrong, 2021).

Bare Psychology

Drawing on Agamben's (1998, p. 103) concept of the "bare life", Giroux (2010) conceptualises a shift in higher education that, arguably, is equally relevant to all professionals working in neoliberal educational contexts, including EPs. Giroux (2010) summarises this shift as producing a "bare" pedagogy that is symptomatic of the prioritisation of concerns around market pressures and economic efficiency. A corollary is the forging of professional identities within an economic rationality (Done & Knowler, 2020b). Agamben (1998) takes Foucault's (2008) theorisation of bio-political power relations as a starting point and, when mobilised in Giroux (2010), what is described is professional decision-making that is heavily influenced by market considerations.

Elizabeth J. Done https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6627-1928

For Giroux (2010), "bare" professional practice is characterised by an instrumentalism born of market pressures. Such pressures, combined with a proliferation of accountability procedures, have radically altered the nature of caring in marketised neoliberal education systems (Ball, 2003). Challenging illegal or socially unjust exclusionary practices in schools can, therefore, be conceived as an ethico-political endeavour and not an unproblematic application of the enduring moral principles contained in professional codes.

In this paper, a deductive analysis informed by Giroux (2010) is offered of data derived from the qualitative survey component of inter-disciplinary research into the perspectives of EPs on illegal exclusionary practices in mainstream secondary schools in England, including their suggestions as to what initiatives might assist in reducing levels of exclusionary practices in schools. A key objective was to consider the role of EPs in sustaining or challenging such practices, and the data supported the positing of a "bare" educational psychology, that is, one that reflects both the fundamental re-organisation of the English public sector in recent decades (Ball, 2003) and associated political and professional discourses. Agamben (1998, p. 103) maintains that such discourses are all the more powerful on account of their inescapability. Hence, schools face difficult choices when negotiating the competing and contested political agendas of ensuring "inclusion" and raising academic "standards" (Done, 2019), whilst EPs practice in a context of "traded services" whereby schools purchase their services. In the following section, we discuss the impact of this business model and suggest that it risks deterring EPs from challenging school practices that, in their professional judgement, are damaging to children and young people. Following this, the practice of "off-rolling" as an illegal exclusionary practice is explained, and details of earlier studies are briefly outlined as a backdrop to the reported EP study. The latter is then described, including the methodological orientation, analytical strategy and findings.

Traded Services

A recent report on the EP workforce defines traded services as:

> Non-statutory services paid for by schools and other organisations. A partially or fully "traded" model is one in which the existing service organisation is required to generate income from "customers" (mainly schools) in order to meet some or all of its costs (Lyonette et al., 2019, p. 4).

The report notes "a corresponding rise in EPs working within other 'trading' organisations such as limited company psychological service providers, social enterprises, or as sole traders" (p. 4). This move towards a business model in the context of diminished funding and shortages of qualified EPs has reduced opportunities for preventative work and individual casework, leading to an emphasis on statutory assessment duties in local authority (LA) educational psychology service workloads (Lyonette et al., 2019, p. 55). A survey of the educational psychology workforce in England found that 85 per cent of newly qualified EP respondents were employed by LAs for at least some of their work time and that many LA educational psychology services (80.6 per cent of respondents) operate a fully or partially traded model, with several services reporting increasing levels of demand for a traded service; there has also been a rise in non-LA EP services (social enterprises, limited companies and sole trader) offering traded services (Lyonette et al., 2019, p. 18).

Whilst Lee and Woods (2017) describe the impact of traded services as largely positive, Shield (Florance, 2017, p. 58) argues that the developing market for EP skills demands identity work as EPs are required to be flexible and self-promote but should also articulate what they "don't feel comfortable doing". A business model requires EPs to maintain relationships with clients in situations where there are ambiguities around whose interests must be prioritised or, ultimately, protected. The client is the school but EPs encounter situations where parents and children consider themselves to be in a client relationship. Any direct criticism of schools in such circumstances is thus risk-laden for EPs. Directly challenging a school around illegal exclusionary practices assumes that the EP can be confident that it has occurred, and yet, schools are very likely to obscure such practices given their illegality (Done & Knowler, 2020a, 2021b). Additionally, as explained below, schools have been assisted in the manufacture and display of legitimacy through "managed moves" (Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021).

Off-Rolling

Although there are legitimate circumstances in which children are removed from school rolls, (e.g., when families relocate to different school catchment areas), the term "off-rolling" is increasingly used to describe exclusionary practices that contravene English legislation governing legal exclusions (Department for Education [DfE], 2012). This law specifies the reasons that schools must give for formally excluding a child from school (either permanently or for a fixed term); for example, incidents of physical violence or persistent disruptive behaviour. Off-rolling describes the contravention of a child's legal entitlement to education (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, 2006) beyond these legally enshrined scenarios. The national school inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, has defined "off-rolling" as the removal of students from school rolls in the absence of a formal fixed-term or permanent exclusion that conforms to legal guidelines (Of-

sted, 2019, p. 50). Ofsted also characterises off-rolling as a "gaming" of school academic performance data that can be effected by, for example, pressurising or manipulating parents to home educate (p. 50). However it occurs, off-rolling is held by Ofsted (2019) to be "primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil" (p. 50). Similarly, Armstrong (2018) maintains that a hegemonic discourse of "regular" schooling accounts for exclusionary practices since the adoption of a traditional "manage and discipline" model of behavioural management permits schools to focus primarily on academic attainment.

A notable feature of the reported study was that EPs shared concerns about a wider range of exclusionary practices beyond off-rolling. This wider context should be acknowledged and includes: growing concern around legal internal exclusionary practices such as removing students from their peers and classrooms and placing them in "isolation" spaces as a punitive measure; the "pull out" of children from classrooms for remediation programmes (Power & Taylor, 2020); part-time timetabling; and instructing parents to keep children with diagnosed conditions at home for one or more days to process why their behaviour fails to meet school expectations (Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021). Where formal exclusion is legally prohibited, as in Wales, such internal exclusionary practices have proliferated (Power & Taylor, 2020) and, by implication, off-rolling is likely to have increased. A report from the voluntary organisation No More Exclusions (2021) on exclusionary activity in English schools during the Covid-19 pandemic-induced closure of schools and partial reopening for "vulnerable" children highlights the varied means through which schools consistently under-report exclusionary practices.

Coerced Home Education

A study by Baynton (2020) found evidence of pressure being applied to parents to home school. This practice of pressurising or manipulating parents or carers into agreeing to home education is described by the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (2017) as coerced, as opposed to elective, home education and it qualifies as off-rolling. The parents in question may be ill-equipped to home educate or their children may require more specialised support.

Managed Moves

Schools in England can legally transfer children to other schools in what are known as "managed moves". However, the Education Act of 2002 stipulated that all parties must consent to the move, including parent and child, raising concerns that this process is similarly open to manipulation by the school. Managed moves are often presented to families as offering a "fresh start", but they permit schools to evade their legal responsibility to provide adequate support to children.

Prevalence

It is the illegality of such pressure on parents, and the manipulation of official procedures by schools, that has prompted illegitimate exclusions to be dubbed "grey exclusions" in other national contexts (Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021). Prevalence is, understandably, extremely difficult to determine in England and elsewhere. Statistical analysis undertaken by, or on behalf of, Ofsted (Bradbury, 2019) is contradicted by suggestions that off-rolling is endemic in the English education system (Children's Commissioner, 2013). This lack of accurate published prevalence data has dictated reliance on anecdotal evidence found in commissioned reports, such as Daniels et al. (2003), Gill (2017) and the annual reports of bodies like Ofsted (2019) and the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (2017). The cumulative weight of such anecdotal evidence is, however, compelling and tends to confirm suspicions that off-rolling is endemic in England's education system despite the UK being a signatory to rights-based international conventions that enshrine the right of all children to education (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, 2006).

Clarity

There is also a lack of clarity around what motivates some schools to engage in off-rolling. Ofsted (2019) notes an over-emphasis nationally on examination results and competitive pressures that incentivise schools to remove students perceived as likely to negatively affect overall school performance data. This argument neglects factors such as the chronic underfunding of the inclusion agenda, which, when combined with the increasing numbers of children entitled to additional support, is causing schools to claim that they can no longer accommodate the needs of all children, particularly those with diagnosed "special" educational needs and behavioural or psychological issues (Jayanetti, 2021). The absence of training for teachers in managing challenging behaviours linked to specific diagnosable conditions or mental health issues has also been noted as it is precisely such students that risk being labelled as persistently disruptive and as warranting exclusion (Armstrong, 2018).

Social Justice

The explanation of off-rolling as strategic exclusion posited by Ofsted (2019) does, albeit indirectly, acknowledge the impact on schools of the neoliberal marketisation of education in recent decades, and the associated discourse of continual improvement that invites impression management or displays of compliance (Ball, 2003). Ofsted (2019) fails, however, to recognise the unintended consequences of this reorganisation of the public sector; for example, parents look to league tables when choosing schools, leaving some

schools in areas of high social deprivation with rolls where in excess of 40 per cent of students have "special" educational needs (Exley & Ball, 2011). The issues of disproportionality and intersectionality now also feature in commissioned reports on legal exclusions; for example, the Timpson Review (DfE, 2019) identifies how the variables of gender, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, "looked after" and "special" need status intersect to increase the risk of exclusion for specific groups. Gill (2017) found that excluded children are twice as likely to be cared for by the state, four times more likely to experience poverty, seven times more likely to have identified "special" educational needs and ten times more likely to have recognised mental health problems. There is no reason to suppose that off-rolling data, if available, would not reveal a similar pattern of over-representation and discriminatory practice. Indeed, there is sufficient evidence of disproportionality in formal exclusions data (DfE, 2021; Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019) to surmise that specific demographic groups are particularly affected by illegal exclusionary practices.

(In)Visibility

The EP study formed one strand of ongoing multi-stranded research comprising several small-scale studies focusing on specific professional groups, including senior school leaders (Done & Knowler, 2021b) and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos) (Done & Knowler, 2021a). One such study involved interviews with parents of children with additional needs who suspected off-rolling and were being supported to contest school actions through legal processes; some parents suspected off-rolling but were not certain that it had, in fact, occurred (Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021). Another study examined the role of SENCos in strategic planning for pandemic conditions following concerns that exclusionary practices might escalate when schools were locked down due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Daniels et al., 2020).

Notably, every study related to perspectives on off-rolling amongst education professionals (Done & Knowler, 2021a, 2021b; Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021) found varying levels of awareness of what constitutes off-rolling. Senior school leaders were presented with hypothetical scenarios and readily identified those where off-rolling was unambiguously linked to manipulation of school performance data, but scenarios related to mental health and safeguarding generated responses indicating a marked lack of understanding, prompting their authenticity to be questioned at data analysis stage (Done & Knowler, 2021b). As previously noted, the changing nature of caring and professional practice in recent decades due to pervasive and powerful neoliberal logics (Ball, 2003) and tensions between the policy agendas of inclusion and academic standards (Done, 2019) have prompted many schools to prioritise the latter, given the damaging fall-out from negative Ofsted judgements. The headteacher of a school that Ofsted deems to be failing risks removal from post or is less able to resist the trend towards academisation that removes schools from local government control and reinforces the commercialisation of education (Wilkins & Olmedo, 2019).

It was the senior school leaders study (Done & Knowler, 2021b) that prompted research into the views and experiences of EPs around off-rolling; here, Foucault's (1978) art of (in)visibility spoke to our concerns around the authenticity of participants' responses as they seemed carefully managed to avoid any implication of deliberate wrongdoing despite ethical assurances of anonymity and confidentiality (Done & Knowler, 2021b). Such responses were interpreted as exemplifying the management of appearances so characteristic of neoliberal education cultures, but also as reflecting Ofsted's policy of naming and shaming schools when off-rolling was found at inspection (Bradbury, 2019).

Ambiguity and uncertainty around exclusionary activity in schools were recurrent themes across all the aforementioned studies, raising questions as to whether, and how, EPs encounter and navigate such impression management by schools and whether the traded service model conditions EPs' responses to off-rolling. It was unclear whether commercial pressures incentivise EPs to avoid challenging off-rolling where they suspect or encounter it, or encourage support for school decisions around formal exclusion and practices like part-time timetabling, on-site isolation facilities, and remedial programmes that separate children from their peers. As Williams (2020) notes, a further implication is neglect of situations that speak to structural inequities when children risking exclusion are predominantly black or mixed-race or those selected for inappropriate remediation are predominantly classified as "the SEN pupils" (Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021; Power & Taylor, 2020). The recasting of market-driven or client-driven decision-making as professional and ethical dilemmas in EP practice could be read as disingenuous or, indeed, a form of impression management.

EP Survey Methodology

The study comprised an online qualitative questionnaire (n = 65) and in-depth semi-structured interviewing via an online platform (n = 10). Findings from the former are reported in this paper. A notable contrast between this and our earlier online surveys was the response rate and volume of data generated. (Analysis of interview data is currently being undertaken by practising EPs within the research team and will be reported in a sequel paper).

Research Questions

The research questions that the study aimed to address were:

- How do EPs working with schools in England understand and explain the practice of off-rolling?
- What are the challenges and dilemmas surrounding this practice for EPs?
- What is the personal and professional impact on EPs' involvement in cases of off-rolling?
- What do EPs say about how the practice of off-rolling might be avoided in England?

Data Collection

An online qualitative questionnaire containing seven themed questions and framed as exploratory was distributed via social media and the researchers' professional networks across England (17 March to 27 May 2020).

Sample

As shown in Table 1 below, of the 65 respondents, only eight were employed by private companies, one was self-employed and another was employed directly by a multi-academy trust (MAT). As suggested by the self-selection of participants, sampling was opportunistic and not intended to achieve a representative sample.

Table 1

Role	Total	Breakdown
Principal/Deputy Principal EP	6	4 LA, 1 private co., 1 CAHMS team manager
Senior/Specialist Senior EP	12	1 NHS, 1 private, 8 LA, 1 self-employed, 1 MAT
Main grade EP	35	33 LA, 2 private company
Trainee EP (Y2/3)	12	8 LA placement, 2 private co. placements, 2 private companies providing statutory service placements

Analysis

Participants were asked whether they had directly experienced or observed off-rolling. In Table 2, the responses are quantified to aid clarity. However, the primary method of data analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2019), was reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) which involved immersion in, and reflective engagement with, the EP data. Such engagement included reflexive consideration of, and potential responses to, the researchers' positionality. Participants were informed of the exploratory nature of the study but also that the researchers were seeking to raise awareness of the extent of off-rolling and its potentially damaging consequences; they were also made aware of the inclusion of practising EPs within the research team.

RTA was selected for data analysis, as it entails familiarity with the data, and a recursive analysis process in which identified themes are then combined within a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A positivistic commitment to value neutrality and a strictly linear analytical process are rejected, and theoretical underpinning is endorsed — in this instance, recognition of the socio-political and economic context in which EPs are obliged to practise, including the organisation of psychology services according to a business model and associated introduction of competitive pressures. From an ethical perspective, awareness of this context precludes the tendency to blame professionals for systemic problems found in political discourse and familiar political narratives; such narratives are exemplified by Ofsted's (2010) SEND review, which attributed shortfalls in provision for children and young people with "special" needs to poor teaching, with training recommended as a solution rather than a radical overhaul of educational priorities and adequate resourcing (Done & Knowler, 2020a, 2020b). Accordingly, the emphasis in the analysis outlined here was on systemic features that may inhibit overt or direct challenges to off-rolling while drawing on the experiential accounts of participants.

An initial coding of responses was content-led, and comments around whether off-rolling had been experienced or observed were grouped according to: type of practice; indications of the frequency of any observations or direct experiences; whether "special" needs or pressure on parents was mentioned; and whether off-rolling was not experienced but encountered indirectly. When asked what role EPs might play in challenging exclusionary practices, responses were grouped under the codes of advocacy, naming exclusionary practices, exposing schools, and pressures militating against such actions.

The allocated codes were then reviewed with reference to the data and organised into themes that were either semantic or latent in nature; the latter are inferred but demonstrably supported by statements volunteered by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The dominant themes were conflicted identities, negotiated ambiguities and manufactured legitimacy. The combining of themes, again with reference to the data, produced the central organising concept of "bare psychology".

Findings

In contrast to findings from our senior school leader study (Done & Knowler, 2021b), where participants had difficulty identifying off-rolling scenarios that were not overtly linked to manipulation of academic performance data, EPs expressed concerns about off-rolling related to mental health, welfare and safeguarding issues. Notably, the majority of

EP participants (50 out of 65) were confident that they had directly encountered off-rolling while a minority (15 out of 65) had not, or were unsure that they had, done so (see Table 2). Those responding affirmatively had experienced multiple cases of off-rolling, for example, "more than is even comfortable to say". Others identified practices that the researchers were unaware of; hence, "informal managed moves between local schools seem to happen a lot", implying that schools are able to circumvent required procedure.

Table 2

Awareness of Off-Rolling

Role	Total	Yes	No	Unsure
Principal/Deputy Principal EP (PEP)	6	5	1	0
Senior/Specialist Senior EP (SEP)	12	11	1	0
Main grade EP (MEP)	35	24	4	7
Trainee EP (Y2/3) (TEP)	12	10	0	2
Total	65	50	6	9

Caution was exercised in interpreting responses related to awareness as the examples of off-rolling given included exclusionary practices that are currently legal, however objectionable and psychologically damaging to children. A broader but, technically, inaccurate definition of off-rolling was evidenced that included any exclusionary practice, meaning that experiences of off-rolling could not be isolated. Participants did, however, note numerous examples of situations that contravene statutory guidance or current definitions of inclusionary practice, including: children remaining in "isolation booths for days or weeks", students experiencing "a series of fixed-term exclusions", parents being advised that "it would be better if X child stayed at home today", also "parents feeling pressured into home educating" and SENCos "putting undue pressure on the parent". Covid-19-induced risk assessments (required to determine if a "vulnerable" child could attend a partially opened school) were also described as being "used as informal exclusion tools".

Schools' reluctance to admit children was also mentioned by a minority of EPs, contradicting Ofsted's (2019) stated assumptions that off-rolling is confined to older students approaching national examinations and refusals of admission are confined to early childhood education and care settings. Concern was expressed about the misuse of alternative provision (AP) in off-site or on-site units (ostensibly intended for assessment or remediation purposes) and for children that had been legally excluded: "We are also asked if we have had involvement with any young person who is excluded. The shock is how few are unknown to our service" (PEP). In relation to "special" needs, it was noted that off-rolling occurs where children "do not fit in" in contravention of relevant statutory guidance which requires schools to adapt, thus evoking the hegemonic culture of "regular" schooling (Armstrong, 2018).

Three dominant themes were identified across the data set: negotiated ambiguity, manufactured legitimacy and conflicted identities.

Negotiated Ambiguity

Whilst two senior EPs stated that they had not encountered off-rolling, with one insisting that elective home schooling was more common in their experience, nine EPs claimed to be unsure. This uncertainty was deemed significant as it underlined how schools can produce a level of ambiguity that deters challenges to school practices. As one main grade EP commented, "This happens and can be easily hidden by settings through their recording and by not informing children and young people of their entitlement to education". Another stated, "I have never been in the room when that [home education] has been suggested to a parent or actually taken place but I have heard from many families that this has happened to them". Others attributed their uncertainty to not knowing whether a child had actually been removed from the roll. Interestingly, a higher proportion of main grade EPs than trainee EPs were unsure whether they had directly experienced off-rolling, and it was surmised that protecting the client relationship would be less of a priority for these EPs.

A majority suggested that challenges to off-rolling could be facilitated if there was less ambiguity around exclusionary practices: "If EPs were more confident in identifying and challenging these practices I feel that it would be an important aspect of our role, but it relies on transparent information sharing on the school's part".

The response to such ambiguities was summarised as adopting the role of "critical friend", explicitly in one case and by implication in others.

> Working with schools must be central [...] so we do not alienate our settings through too much challenge, and therefore not being allowed back in the building, but in a critical friend type of way. They need to know we care before they care about what we know (MEP).

That is, EPs acknowledged an ethical imperative to challenge or "call out" exclusionary practices when observed but also a concurrent imperative to support the ultimate client (the school) in addressing illegalities through revisions to practice, and this was perceived as benefitting the child or young person.

> I think we should know more about legalities and challenging when schools are doing this. I am worried now, though, that other EPs know

> this and I do not! This challenge can fall within our role as a critical friend, where we can highlight that this is not okay but support the school out of the situation and therefore support the child. (TEP)

The concept of "critical friend" was interpreted as a construct that protects professional interests whilst sustaining self-belief in an advocacy role. The professional and ethical imperative to "call it out when we see it" was tempered by an awareness of the complexity of school-based scenarios. Consequently, advocacy was taken to imply an investigative role, including "following up on sudden moves to elective home education" rather than overt criticism of school practices. Indeed, advocacy was repeatedly framed as covering a wide range of more indirect initiatives such as "supporting schools to develop whole-school approaches that address their concerns without resorting to exclusionary practices".

Manufactured Legitimacy

Where EPS had directly experienced off-rolling, many reported "frequent" occurrences, implying long-standing client relationships and awareness that senior management teams and staff members responsible for ensuring an inclusive school ethos (i.e., SENCos) are able to manipulate situations and create an impression of compliance with legislation and statutory guidance:

> Senior Leadership Team [and] Inclusion or SEND school staff advising usually vulnerable parents to home school part time or agree to a "managed move" to avoid exclusion or accept "internal exclusion" to avoid official exclusion. These were or are all in academy schools. (SEP)

A minority were concerned about misuse of alternative provision (AP) which, not unlike the introduction of "managed moves", risks being further legitimised by a governmental discourse of AP standards and professionalisation.

> Excessive use of alternative provisions, even in special schools that are for children with SEMH [Social, Emotional and Mental Health] needs and should therefore be more skilled [than AP]. In my experience it is usually due to challenging behaviour and an inability of the child to "fit" the school's ideas of what they should be, e.g., as a result of rules such as no fidgeting, which some children are unable to follow. (MEP)

The chronic under-funding of the inclusion agenda (Jayanetti, 2021) means that schools can reasonably claim that they are unable to support all children, and this situation risks fostering, and the masking of, exclusionary practices. "Where a parent is aware of their rights, the focus can then be on the LA, and frequently becomes an issue where the setting states they cannot meet the needs or cannot fund the support that the child requires".

Conflicted Identities

The difficulty of challenging "ingrained practices which are counter to inclusion" was a recurrent theme and when asked what EPs' role should be in challenging off-rolling, very few EPs suggested "questioning decisions, challenging individuals' beliefs". Comments ranged from non-specific declarations around "whistle-blowing" or "naming exclusionary practices when [EPs] see them", to the positioning of EPs as being in a relatively privileged relationship with schools such that exclusionary practices could be contested in a constructive and educative manner: "I think EPs have a role in highlighting what is lawful, unlawful and suggesting ways forward" and "we have a central and essential role in challenging such practice, especially in the context of social justice advocacy". It was striking that the actions recommended by EPs in performance data-driven school settings tended to be indirect initiatives (e.g., "more specific training and guidance around what constitutes unlawful off-rolling"): in other words, initiatives not involving direct challenges to current practice in the EP's client school. This reinforces the suggestion that a "bare" education psychology now prevails in the state-maintained education culture in England whereby marketised and privatised services are transforming professional identities and decision-making. This shift is coincident with a professional discourse that presents the EP role as that of exercising moral leadership in the interests of social justice: "I think having a good relationship with senior leadership teams in our settings is crucial so that we can have sensitive conversations about inclusion in a safe and protected manner".

> Often, we are able to have creative discussions and think of inclusive practice and ways forward. However I do feel that there needs to be more supervision in schools to support school staff to feel contained and to sit with discomfort that these children can evoke in them (MEP).

Shifting the focus of attention to assisting parents was interpreted as a way of managing the potential conflict between desires to address exclusionary practices in the interests of children and protection of the client (school) relationship. A proposal that "EPs need to be advocates for parents" echoed Ofsted's (YouGov, 2019) finding that some teachers view educating and empowering parents as the key route to reducing exclusionary practices in schools, particularly those that are illegal.

The theme of conflicted identities was not confined to EPs; SENCos were perceived as instrumental in supporting an ex-

clusionary school culture despite their statutory obligations to ensure inclusive practice.

> I have been party to an annual review for a [. . .] child in a mainstream school with an EHCP [education, health and care plan] and a diagnosis of autism where I felt that the SENCo was putting undue pressure on the parent (who had some learning difficulties) to consider specialist provision. The parent became visibly upset during the meeting and I spoke to my supervisor about this case due to my concern. (MEP).

Power differentials were repeatedly raised by EPs, particularly the lack of parental power in the school–parent relationship, although an EP advocacy role was also framed as support for both school and parent in funding matters: "EPs should be helping schools and parents to get resources such as EHCP funding for pupils who are not coping in mainstream". No EPs commented on the diminishing funds available to LAs to support increasing levels of demand but recognised the need to support schools in this area: "We have the role of advocating for funding and systems that allow schools to provide comprehensive supportive interventions and preventions for students with specific needs".

Several EPs reiterated familiar professional narratives that do not, specifically, address either the issue of off-rolling or the problem of structural inequities and disproportionality as reported by Demie (2019) and Gill (2017).

> I think we have multiple roles. First of all, we have the role of advocating for funding and systems that allow schools to provide comprehensive supportive interventions and preventions for students with specific needs. I think we also have a role within schools to ensure that schools are engaging in high-quality and evidence-based supports for students who are demonstrating behavioural or cognitive needs. (MEP)

The difficulty of challenging exclusionary practices in the context of the traded services business model and the pressure to protect the client (school) relationship were explicitly referenced: "I wonder if the perception of the school as the 'customer' of EP services may also influence the level of challenge from EPs, and if this is something that may be addressed at a service level" (PEP).

Discussion

The study objective was to understand EPs' perspectives on off-rolling, and the concept of "bare" educational psychology permits sense to be made of EPs' reluctance to directly challenge schools engaging in, or suspected of, off-rolling. This reluctance could be read as assisting schools to achieve or manufacture an apparent legitimacy such that off-rolling and other exclusionary practices are not scrutinised or understood as open to question by parents. Additionally, given the structural inequities noted earlier, the effects of indirect advocacy will, in the short-term and at best, be variable and, at worst, minimal for children and young people currently being formally or illegally excluded. It is recognised, however, that EPs must often navigate the ambiguities that schools create around off-rolling.

As the title of this paper suggests, the introduction of competitive pressures on EPs through public sector reorganisation means many are caught between the dual imperatives of protecting the client (school) relationship and professional judgements as to what may be detrimental to children and parents. A poststructuralist perspective facilitates recognition of how a neoliberal promotion of the market and consumer choice is affecting professional decision-making (Ball, 2003; Giroux, 2010) and individualising responsibility (Foucault, 1982). The theme of management of the visibility/invisibility of illegal practices mobilised previously, and informed by Foucault (1978, 2008), was equally relevant to the EP study in that EPs' comments were testimony to how effective some schools are in creating uncertainty around the legality of their practices; hence, manufactured legitimacy became a dominant theme. It means that EPs are left feeling at risk of getting it wrong and damaging the school–EP relationship and their commercial interests, or, proverbially, they are caught between a rock and a hard place.

Comments about the transparency of school practices indicate that senior leaders, where they choose to do so, are able to create school cultures in which exclusionary practices are obscured or hidden, producing uncertainty in other professionals. Despite articulations of uncertainty or frustration on the part of EPs, it is equally quite possible that the historical shift towards a performativity culture (Ball, 2003) has generated mutual awareness of market pressures that serves to unite varied professionals. Non-school-specific initiatives can be promoted and supported precisely because the school–EP relationship is protected through, for example, reliance on "research" or wider "campaigns". In this sense, the process of marketisation is operating as a disciplinary force or a policy technology that ensures greater political control of all education professionals, and that constrains resistance (Foucault, 2008; Giroux, 2010). Criticism is re-worked as calls for ongoing refinement of the education system rather than demands for a thorough overhaul of the values and political priorities which inform that system. In Agamben's (1998, p. 103) terms, the traded service model implies a "continuous relationship" with the power relations that are integral to a marketised system, whereby termination of contractual arrangements is the threat to which EPs are "at every instant exposed". The traded service status of educational psychology carries a risk that the client (school)

and EP relationship will be jeopardised by direct criticism of school decision-making, hence, the familiar political narrative trope of training needs within schools. Marketisation results in a process of exteriorisation where decision-making is driven by attention to external scrutiny (and awareness of the consequences of negative assessments) rather than professional judgement informed by deeply held values (Ball, 2003).

EPs are likely to work directly with students and their parents, and both may consider themselves to be the clients of the EP with whom they have established a relationship of trust; survey responses indicated a high level of concern for both. Parent–school and student–school relationships were conceived as a power relation in which parents were frequently unable, or ill-equipped, to contest school decision-making that would adversely affect their child. The scope for what, in the context of teachers, has been characterised as advocacy leadership (Anderson & Cohen, 2015) is potentially limited where EPs feel pressure to protect their relationship with the school. The finding that a large majority of participants had experienced or observed off-rolling in their professional practice, including informal school transfers and coerced home education, is an indication of the scale of such practices in England's schools and conveys the affective dimension of negotiating conflicting loyalties for EPs. This tension is indicative of the "ethical retooling" that has occurred in professional practice following the marketisation of the public sector in recent decades (Ball, 2003, p. 226). It is not the case that enduring moral or ethical professional principles can simply be transferred to a novel or changing sociopolitical context; there is a process of re-contextualisation (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33) that alters both their affective potential and their practical import. The conceptual framework adopted in the EP study focuses attention on systemic issues rather than ethical dilemmas at an individualised level even though such dilemmas were evidenced in the data. The point is to change that context.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of the reported study dictates that its findings cannot be generalised beyond the sample in question, nor would they necessarily be replicated in similar research utilising a different sample. However, following Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researchers undertook a systematic and rigorous analytical process to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of findings. Whilst not being transferable to all client–EP relationships, it is anticipated that findings will resonate with some EPs and raise important issues around exclusion and inclusion. Self-selection to participate, accompanied by awareness of the researchers' positionality as advocates of meaningful inclusion, is likely to have produced a sample sympathetic to their aims. Comments related to the traded service business model were not researcher-led but resonated with the researchers' interest in exploring the transformation of professional identities by neoliberalising processes and the consequences for inclusion.

Conclusions

This paper was intended to introduce research into EPs' knowledge and experience of off-rolling in schools in England and to provoke consideration of the indirect role that EPs play in the perpetuation of exclusionary practices, despite policy discourse that suggests education is already inclusive and simply demands the selective refinement of inclusive practices. The objective was also to provide a theoretically informed account of issues affecting the professional identities of EPs in the context of neoliberalising processes in education and, more specifically, to explore how EPs understand their relations with client schools when incidents of off-rolling or other exclusionary practices are identified or suspected.

The reported research resonates with findings from earlier studies related to off-rolling that found some degree of complicity on the part of education professionals in both legal and illegal exclusionary practices in England's schools (Done & Knowler, 2021a, 2021b; Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021). However, in the case of EPs, the capacity of schools to obscure or manage the (in)visibility of illegal exclusionary practices leads to uncertainty that, in turn, complicates the relationship between EPs and schools, particularly where EPs wish to challenge those practices. It has been suggested that this relationship has been further complicated by shifts in public sector re-organisation in recent decades, including the privatisation of services. The dilemmas faced by EPs in challenging what they perceive to be practices that are damaging to children and young people have been framed as systemic issues in contrast to individualised professional ethical codes of conduct.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the teaching professionals who participated in the reported study under difficult conditions.

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics and Governance Office,

University of Exeter, Lafrowda House, St. Germans Road, Exeter, EX4 6TL, 7th July 2021, Ref. S2021-104.

Conflict Of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Dr Elizabeth J. Done is a lecturer in inclusion at the Institute of Education (University of Plymouth) and a visiting research fellow at Exeter University's Graduate School of Education, specialising in inclusion, critical perspectives and teacher CPD. Liz supervises PhD students and leads PG

modules related to inclusive education. A key interest is senior leaders' and educational professionals' negotiation of conflicting governmental imperatives.

Helen Knowler is a senior lecturer in Special Educational Needs, Disabilities and Inclusion Studies (SENDIS) in the School of Education at the University of Wolverhampton. She is also the course leader for the National Award for SEN Coordination and works with SENCos on strategic leadership for Inclusion. Helen's expertise relates to Social, Emotional and Mental Health, and she works with a range of people to explore the abolition of school exclusion and the related implications for children and young people identified as having SEMH needs.

Will Shield is a child and educational psychologist who joined the DEdPsych programme as an academic and professional tutor in 2017 and also works as a senior educational psychologist for a local authority. His specific areas of interest and specialism are the wellbeing and mental health needs of children and young people, particularly those who have experienced adversity.

Dr Hannah Baynton completed an educational psychology doctorate in 2020 at the University of Exeter. She currently works as an educational psychologist and is interested in inclusion, attachment and relationships, and social, emotional and mental health needs.

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