



NO MORE EXCLUSIONS

A new radical grassroots
coalition movement in education

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ON ABOLITION AND SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS



1. What does abolition mean?

No More Exclusions is an abolitionist movement. That means we want to stop exclusions altogether – abolish the whole process of exclusion.

Abolitionism is a way of thinking about anti-racism that takes lessons from the struggle against Atlantic slavery. As Angela Davis argues, slavery could not be reformed to be a bit better, a little bit less violent, not quite as dehumanising – it had to be abolished. In a similar way, abolitionists believe that institutions of state racism and violence must be abolished. We must imagine approaches to address the needs and troubles of young people that do not rely on exclusion. As long as exclusions exist, schools will use them to get rid of young people who don't fit the school vision or who have additional needs or complex issues. All young people are entitled to meaningful education in a supportive environment. We want an education system that works for all.

2. “What about the other 29?”

Exclusions are presented as a way of protecting the young people who are allowed to remain in class. However, we never ask what it is like for them to know their school chooses to expel and abandon some young people.

We argue that witnessing the exclusion and isolation of classmates is damaging to the self-esteem and sense of trust and safety of the other 29 members in the class.

In fact, many exclusions have nothing to do with ‘safety’ at all. Young people are being excluded for answering back, persistent ‘defiance’, hairstyles and clothing ‘offences’. What do these exclusions communicate to the other members of the class?

Exclusion conveys that:

- Some young people are expendable and the school is willing to end their education;
- The relationships and friendships between young people are not important. Rarely is any attention given to those left behind when their friend is excluded;
- People in authority can, and do, wield their power unreasonably. And they might do so against anyone, including me;
- People in power will take decisions about my safety without consulting me – my voice is not important in discussions of my safety;
- Schools are very powerful institutions, and in comparison the community has little or no power.



3. The ‘wake-up call’ argument: “What if exclusion and a spell in a Young Offender Institution (YOI) were the intervention the child or young person needed in order to move on with their life? Exclusions are good for those excluded”

Pupils who are excluded know that there are difficulties between themselves and the school. Exclusion is not a ‘wake-up call’. In most cases, exclusion follows an extensive history of incidents between the school and the pupil.

The ‘wake-up call’ argument makes the case that exclusion is designed to support the pupil. If schools have their pupils’ best interests at heart when they exclude, why haven’t they supported young people prior to the point of exclusion?

Exclusion is not good for those excluded. It disrupts (and often ends) a young person’s education and also takes the young person out of their peer network. Losing their access to meaningful education and the support of their peers, excluded pupils are often transplanted to much more threatening environments. We know exclusion leaves young people more vulnerable to being targeted by older predators.

Short custodial sentences break vital links with family, community, education and support services, and provide little opportunity for YOIs to tackle the child’s problems. These often stem from neurological and developmental conditions that have gone unaddressed through childhood, or from a child not receiving adequate support.

18% of sentenced young people in custody had a statement of special educational needs, compared to 3% in the general population. Over 60% of people in the youth justice system have difficulties with speech, language or communication.

Children fail to settle in secure provision and do not feel it is worth investing in the regime or building the relationships with staff members that would help them to make progress. Children are not safe from abuse in these provisions. This fuels and entrenches cycles of violence and self-harming behaviours.

Over two thirds of children reoffend within 12 months of release from secure institutions. Reoffending rates are substantially higher amongst young adults in the criminal justice system than older adult offenders. This shows the destructive cycle of crime that some young people fall into and struggle to get out of.



When we exclude and incarcerate children, we obstruct their future entitlement to be part of the community and set them on a path of future social isolation.

4. “Why should teachers be expected to deal with the most disruptive students?”

Some make the argument that when teachers focus on one disruptive child, they ignore the needs of the other 29 children in the classroom. It is true that teachers are responsible for all of their students’ learning – that includes children who are disruptive. We should ask why a young person is disrupting a lesson. More often than not, it is because they are not engaged by the content or find it hard to access the learning. If a child is taken out of class and into a period of ‘internal exclusion’, they will miss out on more of their education. Once they return, they will find the lessons even harder to access, making them more likely to be disruptive.

Sometimes it is said that a child must be excluded as an example to the others, showing them that ‘bad’ behaviour will not be tolerated. However, this is a model based on fear. If it is fear

that is compelling some young people to comply while causing others to rebel, we are not creating a good environment for learning. Learning, it has been conclusively shown, takes place when there is an intrinsic motivation to engage in learning. By contrast, the example we are showing by exclusion is that people with more power can intimidate others into obedience. These atmospheres of coercion are not conducive to countering bullying or preventing violence among students.

5. “It’s not fair on teachers to expect them to manage ‘difficult’ children in the classroom when they have so many other pressures”

The pressures teachers are under come from the marketisation of education and an accountability model based on data gathering for competition and standardisation – all of which harm relationships between teachers and children and between teachers and parents. At the same time huge cuts in funding are piling more pressure on schools and school staff. Moreover, instead of seeing the child as ‘difficult’, we should consider whether conditions in the classroom might be difficult for the child and ask how we could work on adapting classrooms and education to meet the needs of children who need more support.

6. “What about sexual abuse and violence in schools?”



Sexual violence is a serious issue. However, punishing people who have caused harm is not shown to actually change their behaviour. It would be more effective to recognise the conditions that produce sexual violence and to work to uproot the culture within a school that enables abuse. Instead of an environment that discourages young people from coming forward, we would rather build a culture that supports them to understand their own boundaries and respect the boundaries of others, to feel safe to assert their boundaries, and to speak up if someone is encroaching on their boundaries.

Abuse is about power, and it is also important to address abuse by adults towards young people in schools and other institutions. As children we are taught just to accept the authority of adults, and this can lead us to learn to ignore our own sense of discomfort.

By creating a culture of consent, not just among students but also between students to staff, we both allow young people to have their agency and also make them less likely to want to transgress someone's else's boundaries, encouraging people to respect each other and hold themselves to account. By contrast, in environments in which their

consent is constantly violated, young people might wonder: “Why should I care about someone else's boundaries if mine are always being transgressed?”

7. “What about violence? What about the victim?”

Yes. What about victims? What support structures do schools have in place for people who have experienced violence or harm? Punishment of one person is not the same as support for another. We need to take the time to understand how the harm has affected the victim and what support they need to heal. Our education system does not support those who do experience harm and violence to be able to heal and to continue with their education. For example, in 2018, the Joint Council for Qualifications refused to allow a boy who had missed his GCSE exams after being stabbed to be given his predicted grades.

Another important question to consider is who we count as a victim. So often when we talk about victims and perpetrators, we focus only on situations involving interpersonal violence, ignoring people who are harmed



by state and structural violence – for example people experiencing the everyday violence and material deprivation caused by economic inequality and racism. The education system should recognise these forms of harm and ensure that those experiencing it are also supported.

Exclusion is a humiliating experience; it is the violent removal of a child from the classroom. We need to challenge and remove violence from our classrooms, not respond violently by excluding children, even those who have acted violently. No teacher should consider a child to be unteachable. Instead we need a model where the victim of violence can experience justice, for example by explaining their feelings so that the perpetrator can understand the harm they have caused. The perpetrator should also be allowed to explain what made them angry and violent and be given room to reflect on the way they acted. Exclusion is a shortcut, a fast-track way to remove the symptoms of problems, rather than address the causes. We don't ask what made a child fight; the child is simply removed from the classroom, but the violence is not removed.

Exclusion simply shifts the problem elsewhere. By sending a child to a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), we have not dealt with the underlying issues, and society is not any safer as a result. In fact, often the opposite is true.

When we commit to creating a school environment in which all children are safe, we need to think about what safety for victims actually means. Rather than excluding someone who has caused harm, thereby depriving them of their education and community and exposing them to further harm themselves, schools should provide real support to address the needs of all who have been harmed – which may include children who have perpetrated harm. Support includes meeting the children's psychological and educational needs. When harm occurs, exclusion does not serve the needs of children, either victims or perpetrators; it just writes children off.

Moreover, schools should not claim to speak on behalf of children's best interests in order to punish other children. Even beyond our duty to protect children who have caused harm, exclusion fails to protect and support the victims in whose name it is practised. The victim's trauma has not been addressed, and the exclusion of a fellow pupil can even backfire and have the opposite effect: the victim can be blamed for having 'caused' someone's

exclusion and be ostracised or bullied by the excluded child's friends and community. Exclusion also sends the message to children, especially to Black and Brown children, that they are problems and can be eliminated from their school, rather than that they are valued, included and safe within the community. This does not help foster a feeling of safety in the school environment.

8. “Troubled kids would have ended up in prison or committing crime anyway”

Troubled kids are the ones crying out for help. They may have faced trauma and neglect at home.

We cannot neglect them. They are the ones who suffer from ideologies that say they were going to turn out bad anyway. This is the harsh reality of how children of colour are being stereotyped and criminalised from birth.

When we exclude without acknowledging the facts – more than half of all excluded pupils go to prison at some point and are set on a path of negative life outcomes – the state is essentially saying, “Well if it's broke, don't fix it – they were always going to turn out bad. Nothing to do with us.” This is unacceptable and an abdication of the state's duty of care.



9. “Exclusions aren't supposed to help the excluded child. They are meant for the staff, teachers and other pupils”

This is essentially admitting the belief that excluded children have no rights to an education and are owed nothing by schools. What about the physical, social and mental trauma that exclusions cause and how they lower children's self-esteem? Exclusion then also impacts on the other pupils, making them feel that if they do something bad, they will end up with no help or support either. This is especially true for Black communities – it's “You are not supposed to be a part of society, why should we help you?” It shows how white supremacy will not take its hands off the necks of marginalised communities; it damages lives and reaps all the benefits.

10. “Exclusions can be the start of something new and positive”

How can exclusions be positive if they are tearing apart people's mental health? How can they be positive if pupils are viewing teachers as police and the enemy instead of as educators? How can they be positive if you



are separating kids from kids? It reminds me of prison and isolation. Synonyms of exclusions are barring and keeping out the marginalised people from society. This is how years of propaganda and negative portrayals of Black communities still remain in these racist institutions.

11. “Most students are excluded for violent acts. Children who fight should be excluded immediately, even for one fight. Most headteachers are good people and won’t exclude unless it’s serious”

No, most students are excluded for ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’. This category does not include ‘violent acts’. In addition, what is disruptive to one teacher may not be to another as different teachers have different levels of tolerance, classroom management skills, experience, biases, values and attitudes. All behaviour is communication. That should always be the starting point.

Black British students (specifically Black Caribbean

and Dual Heritage students with one Black Caribbean and one White parent) are excluded at three times the rate of white English students and those Black British students are ‘less likely to fit the typical profile of excluded white pupils’ (such as having special educational needs, free school meals, longer and more numerous previous exclusions, or being looked-after children). No. The only other countries that choose to exclude at a rate similar to or higher than England are South Africa, Australia and the USA. These are all settler-colonies that have imitated Western European forms of society, each with their own particular histories of apartheid and genocides.

We are told that students shouldn’t fight, but those from working-class backgrounds are targeted for recruitment to the largest purveyors of British state violence: the police and the army.

How can a racial capitalist society know anything about the inherent value and humanity of young people? So far it has proven to be adept only at knowing the potential profits to be made from their (mis)education. Therefore, being excluded cannot be a synonym for being a bad person. Neither can I put your word about a person’s ‘good intent’ above that of the consciousness of the people around me who have studied



and been brought up in your society to the extent that we know it better than you do.

We should be aiming to prevent violence. The problem with using exclusion as a solution to violence is that this strategy doesn't even try to prevent violence. You're saying, 'It's ok if violence happens, as long as the perpetrator is punished afterwards.' At that point, the harm has already happened. And the circumstances leading to an individual perpetrating violence, the root causes, are still in existence after the punishment. If we really care about violence and victims of violence, we should be aiming to end it.

12. “Can't difficult children get better support in alternative provision (AP)?”

You are already outcast at that point; PRUs/AP carry a negative connotation and stigma. It stays with you all throughout life and you live with the impact on the self, constantly wondering, “Do I belong in society, did my peers have the same challenges as me, do they know as much as I know about expulsion, how do they cope?” Even the ones who do not end up as victims or perpetrators of crime carry the stigma, shame and weight of exclusion for life – of having been relegated to segregated, potentially second-rate schooling in AP or in a PRU.

13. “All staff in PRUs are specialised and qualified to teach challenging children in small classes”

It's often the excuse I hear from people. I'd say two things: firstly, sometimes it's a postcode lottery on quality; there are many unregulated alternative provisions out there. Secondly, why can't this expertise be in schools for early intervention and support? Segregation is the problem – bring resources and expertise within, don't trade it out.

14. “Correlation is not causation” – the argument that there is no conclusive proof that exclusions put children at risk of youth violence and other terrible outcomes

When exploring human experience in real-life contexts, it is rare to find single factors that cause behaviours to occur. Researchers tend to find associations or correlations between a range of factors.



For example, there is a very strong correlation between exclusion and youth violence. As reported by the Home Office (2019), young people who have been excluded are six times more likely to carry/use a weapon than those who have not been excluded. The Ministry of Justice (2018) reports that 88% of young men and 74% of young women in prison have been excluded from school at some point. In sum, being excluded from school makes it far more likely that a child will carry a knife and become involved in youth violence or criminality.

According to the Home Office, factors that correlate most significantly with youth violence are: gender (males), early puberty, maltreatment (physical, sexual, emotional abuse), parental drug use, poor relationship with parents, number of siblings, school exclusion, truancy, being a victim, feeling unsafe in home neighbourhood, feelings of isolation, risk-taking tendency and self-control issues. These are often called *risk factors*.

Analysing correlational data is about considering how numerous social forces *interact*. Every child and every social context are different. The key is that school exclusion can be a hugely impactful event that exists in a *chain of causality*.

A typical example: a boy, currently in puberty, has experienced abuse /maltreatment, poor parental relationships, victimisation and feels unsafe in his neighbourhood. These *risk factors interact*, and each accruing factor makes it more likely that a young person will become involved in criminality. School exclusion is a further negative experience in a chain of causality that often leads to psychological, social and emotional conditions that make this likely. It is the interaction between factors and the timing of events that is important.

Hence, whilst exclusion and no other single factor can be shown to *cause* youth violence, it is hugely significant for many young people and this is why it is so highly correlated.



A Useful Glossary from the Trade Union Movement

The violence of exclusions begins with the exclusion of young people from the very debates and processes which impact them the most. We need to be bringing the experiences, voices and presence of young people into the process at all times.

Liberal ventriloquism – Speaking for children’s best interests. Speaking as the child who will apparently benefit from exclusion. This is violent, given it goes against testimony, experience and evidence.

Hostaging – The invocation of the best interests of children as a cover for self- or corporate interest. Designed to play on and profit from the attachment and care felt by teachers/ parents/the public in relation to children. Children used as ‘human shields’ for power grabs or power retention.

The Titanic tactic (the mention of re-brokering) – The union is steering us into an iceberg and we will all drown. Better jump the union ship before this happens and steer back on track. Never

mind that staff feel like they have been re-arranging the deckchairs for a long time and many staff have already jumped ship.

Teacher-tainting / gaslighting – The people with the most power and who have control over the teacher’s role, agency and movements in the school blame and stigmatise the teacher and hold them responsible for conditions that they have imposed and enforce. Backs up ‘capability’ threat.

It’s you or the kids (hostage swap) – Your jobs will be at risk if we have to spend more on this school. It’s too expensive to invest in support for marginalised and ‘challenging’ young people in education. Restructuring and redundancies could

The terms below refer to common tactics that are particular to school and Multi-Academy Trust HR approaches in union negotiations.

Being able to name the processes unfolding enables union negotiators to stay focused on members’ and young people’s interests.

happen if the union continues to demand more support.

One love (the unitary approach) – In Human Resource Management (HRM) theory there are three models of industrial relations. They are pluralism (“we all have a seat at the table even though our interests are different”); unitarism/unitary approach (“our interests are the same, we all want the same thing, there is actually no need for unions”); and conflict (“we have different interests and we will name the conflict and resist”). The most common HR approach is the unitary one and it is often invoked in negotiations. Identifying it is important, as if it is unconsciously accepted, it can undermine union legitimacy.



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Thank you to the many members, friends and supporters of **NME** for your contributions. These questions were answered by a mixture of young people who have experienced exclusion and its consequences, parents, teachers and support staff, professionals in fields such as the Law and Social Services and other members of the community

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