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What do teachers in a Pupil Referral Unit value most in supporting the development of pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties?w

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ABSTRACT

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) exist to cater for those children unable to attend mainstream schools, largely for behavioural reasons. In 2021, over 11,000 children in England attended PRUs with the aim of modifying their behaviour through engagement with a broad curriculum resulting in reintegration into mainstream settings, or where appropriate, into special schools. The expectations that the government, Ofsted, parents and pupils have of PRUs have been well reported. Rarely, however, have teachers in PRUs been asked for their views on what works in supporting pupils towards successful outcomes. My doctoral research aims to do precisely that; through face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, nine teachers, with a combined teaching experience of 112 years, were asked for their experiences and opinions. Ongoing data analysis suggests that practical activities, a focus on literacy and the correct identification of need prior to the allocation of a PRU placement are all regarded as important by PRU teachers. Through this reflection on my research so far, I consider why this is an area I judge important to explore and how its importance is perhaps not recognised outside the sector itself. Method and methodology are discussed before reflecting on the initial findings from early (but incomplete) analysis.

Introduction: What is a Pupil Referral Unit?

It is surely incontrovertible to say that all children are entitled to a good education. The *Elton Report* (DES, 1989) made clear the path that has led us towards the current position. It articulated the need to explore alternative approaches to both the curriculum offered and methods of delivering it to better support more disaffected pupils. In doing so, it called for greater differentiation, parental involvement and an individualised approach to teaching children, rather than, for example, single-strategy teaching of whole classes irrespective of variations in pupils' understanding and needs (Cole and Visser, 1999). The subsequent *Education Act* (DES, 1993) tightened the requirements relating to the exclusion of pupils and considered their appropriate placement in terms of the type of school they attended. It was the catalyst for the first

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Special Education Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) which laid out the rights and expectations of pupils with SEN and enshrined in law every child's entitlement to an appropriate education offer relative to their individual needs, be that in mainstream, special or alternative settings. From this basis, Pupil Referral Units were born, developing throughout the 1990s.

In England, the educational offer is made for the majority of children through the provision of mainstream schools. However, there are those for whom mainstream schools are not the best fit, and this includes a sector designated as Alternative Provision (AP). AP is defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as "… provision for children unable to attend mainstream school due to exclusion, illness or other reasons" (2013, p. 3), with four areas for pupil support defined: those needing more focussed support from staff than mainstream settings can provide, those excluded for one-off incidents or acts of violence, vulnerable pupils with mental health difficulties and disengaged pupils who may have very low mainstream attendance rates" (DfE, 2018). In a report from the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) AP is described as "… a forgotten part of the education system, side-lined and stigmatised as somewhere only the very worst behaved pupils go." (p. 3). And yet, in the academic year 2021/22 (the most recent for which data are available) there were 29,184 children in AP settings in England (DfE, 2021). This number includes those who had been, or were at significant risk of being, permanently excluded from their mainstream schools, those being taught in hospital during lengthy illnesses and those taught at home recovering from, for example, broken legs. It might also include children with anxiety, making them unable to attend school regularly. It could, in fact, include anything that might prevent a child from being catered for by a mainstream school.

Who might attend a PRU?

Clearly, there are many reasons children might attend AP and there are, therefore, a variety of types of AP. The single largest type is the Pupil Referral Unit, catering for children displaying more challenging behaviours, often involving violence towards their peers or their teachers in mainstream settings. They are too often mentioned *sotto voce* in discussions of education, if at all, with both the House of Commons Library (2017) and HM government (n.d.) completely omitting AP from their descriptions of education provision across the country. One participant in my research, 'Stan', has over twenty years of experience teaching in PRUs. He said that although he recognises that things have moved on over the years, he still feels that people both inside and outside the profession view PRUs as "… *the tatty shed in the corner of the field*". Stan's experience is that once a challenging child has been removed from a mainstream setting and allocated a place at a PRU, they can be forgotten, considered somebody else's 'problem' and no longer a drain on the school's resources or a troublesome statistic for the league tables. This in turn means that reintegrating pupils after a PRU placement can be an uphill struggle, as outlined by the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) which reflects on the difficulties inherent in reintegration, suggesting that it "… is not right that some schools can opt out of receiving pupils back to mainstream schools…" (p. 23).

In 2021/22, there were 11,684 children in PRUs (DfE, 2021). To put this figure in perspective, it is worth remembering that this does not include those children being taught in isolation in their mainstream schools. Neither does it account for those absent from school for medical reasons nor those attending special schools. The House of Commons Education Committee (2018) recognises that AP "needs high quality teachers" (p. 28) recommending that teacher training should include time spent teaching in alternative settings (p. 29). The report goes on to point out that academic attainment is measured almost exclusively using mainstream performance measures (such as GCSE results and apprenticeship take up) and argues that the "fragmented educational" journey that many pupils have had should be taken into account (p. 37).

In terms of pupils' attainment in adulthood, Fischer Family Trust (2022) reports that, in describing those who were either studying full-time or in employment at the age of 21 as having attained a 'positive destination', '… 53.8% of those who experienced AP and 56.4% of those who were permanently excluded were observed in a positive destination, compared with 91.5% of those who experienced neither.'

The numbers are not small, and it is important that provision is expertly planned and delivered, not only for the good of the pupils concerned but also for the greater societal good, since outcomes for children who attend PRUs can be poor in adulthood. The Ministry of Justice (2012), for example, interviewed over 5000 serving prisoners covering a range of topics. They had been convicted of a variety of crimes and were serving assorted sentences. It was found that 47% of those interviewed had been permanently excluded from at least one school, and 63% had received fixed term exclusions (up to five days at any one time). This is not to suggest that there is a 'career pathway' from PRUs to prisons, but rather that children who attend PRUs may experience the kinds of challenges that lead to poor decision-making due to limited experience, vision, aspiration or expectation.

Anecdotally, it is suggested that former PRU pupils are less likely to complete GCSEs successfully, less likely to be in employment and more likely to engage in criminality than pupils who have not attended a PRU, but the research is, at best, patchy. Although there is a relatively small amount of literature regarding the potential poor outcomes of PRU pupils, there is scant research into what constitutes success in England's PRUs and what it might take to attain success. There are a small number of case studies describing successful institutional outcomes, be they organisational (Leather, 2009) or in terms of pupils' reintegration into mainstream schools (Groom, 2006; Pirrie and Macleod, 2009). Additionally, some research has focussed on pupil voice research in general (Martin, 2010) and pupils' perceptions of the outcomes achieved (Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Jalali and Morgan, 2018). However, no literature was found specifically concerning PRU teachers' perceptions of what is effective in PRU classrooms.

This lack of existing research and the importance of getting the provision right for the notable number of children unable to attend mainstream schools provides the first reason for the need for my research. There have, however, been several government documents produced, and a small amount of diverse research has been undertaken in the field, some of which are outlined here. In addition to *The Elton Report* (DES, 1989) that started the focus on alternatives to mainstream education, subsequent *Education Acts* (DES, 1993; DfE, 1996) and guidance from the Department for Education (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2014a; DfE, 2017; DfE, 2023a) have shaped the range of AP. There are useful annual reports published by, for example, Fischer Family Trust (n.d.) and Integrated (2021) providing analysis of reasons for exclusions and pupil destinations. The House of Commons Education Committee (2018) recommended that subjectivity in terms of school exclusions might be addressed through focussing on teacher recruitment and professional development, and that AP should be viewed as merely part of a suite of strategies for meeting pupils' needs; Nicholson et al. (2018) championed addressing pupils' needs on an individual basis; Stamou et al. (2014) called for AP settings to be well-equipped and attractive, and the Centre for Social Justice (2018) concurred that teacher-training was paramount and should include knowledge of those circumstances that may lead to vulnerability and, therefore, exclusion, such as poor mental health, family breakdown and SEN.

Why is it important to undertake this research?

There is an apparent lack of literature drawing on teachers' experience and asking what they think is important or useful in their classrooms. There is

even less literature regarding the experiences of PRU teachers. This is a significant part of what I set out to address in my research. There are personal reasons, too, why this area of research is important to me. I have worked in education for thirty years. In that time, I have been a classroom teacher, a middle leader and I have worked in the advisory service of a local authority (LA). I have taught in both primary and secondary settings and even briefly worked in the private sector. The last ten years of my career have been spent as a senior leader in a PRU. In those thirty years I have never been asked (outside of the schools in which I have worked) for my opinion on schools, teaching or learning. I have never been asked what helps children learn in my classroom despite a slew of positive Ofsted inspection judgements. We rarely hear from teachers in this area.

Much literature exists on a wide range of topics focussing on pupil voice research, but relatively little has sought the opinions, feelings and experiences of teachers directly. The small amount of research available regarding teacher voice can be very specific in terms of subject or location (see Young, 2018: research concerning newly qualified Special Education teachers in Australia, and Hopkins, 2016: an online survey regarding teacher evaluations of student performance in K-12 in America). There are some pieces of research centred around teachers in or including those in PRUs, but they are small-scale, stand-alone studies such as that of Farouk (2014) which elicits the perceptions of three teacher switching from mainstream to PRU classrooms, or they result from a survey such as the National Foundation for Educational Research report by Worth & Van Den Brande (2020) which is so broad in coverage that data is collected on areas not directly related to PRUs (for example, post-16 experiences, National Curriculum implementation and perceptions of pupil behaviour in mainstream settings).

Stakeholder perceptions

It would be easy to think of schools merely in terms of teachers and pupils, but there are many others who have a stake in the way schools operate. Sometimes, for example, following an Ofsted inspection, their perceptions are made clear as a matter of course. Sometimes, as is often the case with parental involvement, they are invited to contribute to the discussion. It can be valuable to hear a range of different voices to best support pupils. Education is an essential element of a functioning, developed society and we find, quite rightly, that organisations and individuals have opinions regarding what should and should not be going on in schools. This includes both individuals and organisations as well as me in my capacity as researcher.

In no particular order, some are highlighted below:

- Teachers and schools are well-informed with regard to what the government wants to be happening in schools. It sets the curriculum (DfE, 2014b) and oversees examination subject content (DfE, 2023b); it takes political decisions, for example regarding the organisation of education through the provision of Trusts, Free Schools and the scope and funding of local authorities.
- Ofsted and its requirements are very familiar to practitioners. The inspection framework is accessible and provides clarity relating to judgements Ofsted will make and the criteria against which they will be made (Ofsted, 2023). It provides a regular external evaluation of practice and has become a major benchmark by which schools are judged by parents and pupils.
- School senior leadership teams exist, at least in part, to shape what goes on in individual schools and to communicate this to teachers and other staff. This will be shared through policies, briefings and the developing ethos of individual settings.

- Newspapers and the media in general are not shy of sharing their views irrespective of quite how perceptive their thinking may or may not be. For example, it would have been difficult in summer 2023 in the UK to avoid the story of a child being facilitated in identifying as a cat by her school in The Guardian, The Daily Mail and The Telegraph (Adams, 2023; Pyman, 2023; Clarence-Smith et al, 2023). Despite quickly being demonstrated to be completely untrue, the story ran for several days across many news outlets and the school received a 'snap' Ofsted inspection as a result of the erroneous reporting.
- Education is something of which the vast majority of people have personal experience; everybody has an opinion on education because they have had some sort of school experience.
- More positively, parents and carers are increasingly involved in their child's education through, for example, completing satisfaction surveys on entry and exit. They are invited to parents' evenings and open days and lines of communication are kept open throughout the academic year or pupil placement. Increasingly, pupils are asked for their feedback and feelings regarding a variety of school issues from uniform policy to charity fundraisers and many things in between.

The House of Commons Education Committee (2018) reported that it felt "… unconvinced that schools and parents will be able to place pupils in the most appropriate setting for them if they do not know about the full range of alternative provision on offer" (p. 18) and that pupils and parents are currently not involved enough in the process (p. 19). It is vital that communication is maintained between school settings, parents and pupils, particularly when facing exclusion, because it is only through a thorough and shared understanding of the provision on offer that the most appropriate place for individual children can be ascertained.

Methodology and method

To address these important areas in my research, I undertook a small study involving nine teachers from two PRUs belonging to a single Multi-Academy Trust. These are charitable companies, limited by guarantee (DfE, 2014c). They are funded by the state but are self-governing and divorced from the LA. The nine participants ranged from the recently qualified to teachers with 28 years of experience and represented teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders. Their experience encompassed the full range of curricular subjects including, English, maths, information and communication technology (ICT), science, music, personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) and humanities. In eliciting the experiences of teachers, a phenomenological approach was employed as this considers direct experience and sees behaviour affected directly by prior experience (Cohen et al., 2000). Conforming to Husserl's (1970) definition of descriptive phenomenology relying on listening and interaction to develop the understanding of lived experience, this methodology provides opportunities to facilitate, record and analyse narrative accounts of professional practice resulting in a rich source of qualitative data from which to analyse and report. It results in a qualitative study, focussing on how teachers reflect in one-to-one interviews regarding their professional experiences and is, therefore, inductive in terms of the emergence of themes from the data. Ontologically, the study is broadly relativist as it concerns the 'subjective experience of reality and multiple truths' (Levers, 2013. p. 2). The ontology in turn prescribes the epistemology of the piece and this, together with the researcher's previous experience teaching in a PRU, means that an emic (insider) approach is appropriate. Cohen et al. (2000) describe this as a potentially useful position, since it enables the researcher to "… use the conceptual frameworks of those being researched" (p. 139).

The main method of data collection was through individual semi-structured interviews. Byrne (2004) advocates the use of the semi-structured interview, describing it as "… likely to get a more considered response … and therefore provide better access to interviewee's views, interpretation of events, understandings, experiences and opinions …" (p. 182). Having myself spent ten years as a senior leader in a PRU setting, Noaks and Wincup's (2004) description of semi- structured interviews as being appropriate where there is a shared understanding fits well with this study. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows for experiences to be explored more fully, with Punch (2005) recognising that it elicits an emotional rather than a rational response. This approach facilitates the pursuance of areas of interest previously unconsidered (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286). The flexibility inherent in the process means that questions can be rearranged and refocussed by the researcher in response to replies given by participants, meaning that the pace and direction can be driven and led by the interviewee (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p.3).

Each teacher participated in an individual, semi-structured interview to provide an opportunity for them to talk freely about their professional experiences within something of a framework. As advocated by Fylan (2005), the number of questions planned was small to facilitate discussion around the topic with short supplementary questions employed to encourage reflection by participants. Participants were asked questions relating to a variety of areas of their practice and experience including how long they had been teaching, the types of settings they had worked in and the subjects they had taught. They were asked about how they define success for pupils in the PRU and how this differs from mainstream notions of success. Finally, questions explored the things they would like to see changed, perhaps including those things over which they do not have immediate or direct control.

Following the individual interviews and an initial analysis of the transcripts, the intention was to undertake a focus group meeting with all participants. Focus groups are interviews with groups of people, led by a moderator. As described by Morgan (2012), "… focus groups work best when what interests the research team is equally interesting to the participants…" (p. 10). The focus group aimed to check my understanding of what they had told me individually, to allow participants to elaborate on what they had said and to put in order of importance those things they had told me were of most significance to them. Due to the impact of repeated Covid lockdowns in 2021 and the catch-up programmes put in place by the PRU, it was not possible to arrange a time when all participants were available to join a focus group, and so I undertook this follow-up through a short questionnaire based on their interview responses instead. This had a 100% response rate.

Designed by Gerard Houlton in the 1970s; developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2021), thematic analysis requires the first two phases to be concerned with familiarising oneself with the data and beginning to identify themes. Praise for the process is provided by many authors, including Joffe (2012) and Maguire & Delahunt (2017). They assert that, although a lengthy process, thematic analysis allows for research questions to be revisited frequently throughout the process of analysis, allowing the researcher to ensure that appropriate questions have been asked and data produced.

Early findings

Data analysis is currently being undertaken through a process of thematic analysis, adapted from Braun and Clarke's model (2006, 2012, 2021), and is in the very early stages. However, even at this point, there are some distinct headlines emerging.

The clear consensus was that practical or physical activities engage pupils most effectively in a PRU. Teachers talked about establishing groups through a nurturing approach and having a structure to the day with which pupils can become familiar. This structure was seen as an element often missing from

pupils' mainstream experiences and something that can help to prepare them for different elements of their day. The importance of personalising the offer made to pupils was mentioned more than once; some pupils might arrive at the PRU with academic gaps in their learning, and yet they might be placed in the same group as others who do not have these gaps but who find it difficult to work collaboratively, or independently, for example.

There was agreement that the social and emotional needs of pupils must be addressed as a priority on entry. Relationships, socialisation and empathy need to be developed sufficiently to enable academic learning to take place. This will not happen unless children feel a degree of comfort and security in their surroundings. When asked how they recognise and assess success in this area, one participant encapsulated many responses when they replied, 'God, Paul!... How do you measure a smile?'. Some things are difficult, if not impossible, to measure in an educational setting. This, the teachers stressed, must be addressed as the number one priority if any type of discernible pupil progress is to be made. Overall, participants were very clear that success in a PRU is more likely to be viewed through a lens of pupil socialisation than is the case in mainstream settings.

In terms of changes outside their control that might improve outcomes for pupils, participants agreed on some significant points:

I. A PRU-specific inspection framework.
PRUs are currently inspected by Ofsted against the same expectations as are mainstream schools. Participants felt that this puts PRUs on the back foot from the start as pupils arrive at different ages, stages and readiness for learning. They arrive at different times of the year and stay for differing durations of placement. Their needs cannot be fully planned for until they begin their placements, making visible progress difficult to assess during a one or two-day inspection. Participants suggested that if pupils were able to cope with a mainstream offer, they would not have found themselves in the PRU in the first place.

II. Freedom from the national curriculum.
Teachers all felt that they are striving to achieve different outcomes for pupils through the development of different skills than mainstream schools and would benefit from the autonomy to use the national curriculum more freely to facilitate this. Similarly, not being tied to national expectations regarding testing would allow pupils to learn at a different pace and to be evaluated at times appropriate to their stage of learning.

III. An appropriately defined pupil cohort.
Participants' number one change would be to define the needs of the pupils accepted onto the PRU roll and to stick to it. Having been established to cater for children demonstrating challenging behaviour meaning that, for a short time, they are unable to attend mainstream schools, the roll has now morphed into any pupil mainstream schools do not want to engage with. Pupils exhibiting persistent low-level behavioural concerns are supposed to be supported in their mainstream schools with additional support. Pupils with identified additional needs and who have been awarded an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are not supposed to be placed in PRUs, but rather should be attending specialist schools. The lack of these specialist places, and the inability or disinclination of some mainstream schools to work with these children means that they get 'dumped' and forgotten in Stan's '… tatty shed in the corner of the field'.

Conclusion: 'So what'?

The potential importance of this research lies in making those who make decisions hear from those

who enact them and for teachers to learn from their colleagues and peers. At this stage, before a full analysis has been completed, there are three key points on which to reflect.

Firstly, children who should be supported in mainstream schools or who should attend special schools cannot do so because of a lack of places and/or support available. These children end up being sent to the PRU, taking places that could be of more use to other children. The system is becoming gridlocked.

Secondly, I would hope that this research provides a springboard for further study of this sector given the dearth of existing research into the experiences of PRU teachers and the potential value of what they have to impart from a unique viewpoint.

Lastly, it might be possible to use a growing body of research to lobby policymakers for change. PRUs have existed for a significant period of time now and are increasingly in danger of trying to be all things to all people. Those in charge must be given the information required to make the changes necessary in order to provide a good education to the significant number of children unable to attend mainstream settings for specific reasons.

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