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Curriculum in alternative provision: Conversations with senior leaders

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Abstract

Over the last four to five years, I've increasingly been reflecting on the role of what were formerly referred to as offsite or pupil referral units. These are now subsumed within a more generic grouping known as alternative provision. My interest has been triggered by the recent publication of 'Alternative provision in local areas in England: a thematic review', which, among other things, 'sets out good practice and highlights particular areas requiring further attention'. This was sufficient stimulus for me to continue my conversations with a small group of school leaders, working in both specialist and mainstream settings, regarding their views on what might best represent effective provision for learners at risk of disengaging from formal education or who have already been excluded from the system.

Key points

- The increasing number of students excluded from schools resulted in the growth of 'alternative provision' for those most at risk.
- However, major areas of concern relating to practices within of alternative provision settings, including the need for a more personalised approach to curriculum design and teaching and learning in response to individual student need.
- A series of informal semi-structured conversations were undertaken with senior leaders in schools, regarding 'promising practices' in curriculum provision.
- The school leaders reported strong personal commitment to students at risk of exclusion and believed that curriculum and pedagogy can support greater engagement and student resilience.
- The study illustrates that senior leaders cast doubt on 'silver bullet' solutions for students at risk of exclusion.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF AP

Over the last 10 to 15 years, schools in England have been giving increased attention to developing practical responses to the challenges presented by students at risk of exclusion or whose inappropriate behaviours result in their exclusion from mainstream school provision (Gill et al., 2024). Numerous reports, as well as several major policy initiatives, have characterised the national implications of these concerns (Joseph & Crenna-Jennings, 2024). Such attention is not unique in the context of the recent history of education or in terms of the widespread international initiatives designed to address this situation. Exclusion and/or suspension from

school has been a consistent theme in the narrative of education over the last 50 or more years (Parsons & Howlett, 1996; Taylor & McCluskey, 2024). In global terms, the pressing need of school systems, in a policy climate that emphasises inclusive education, is to address the needs of marginalised learners whose inappropriate behaviour makes them 'hard to reach' (Daniels & Thompson, 2024, pp. 13–14).

In England, alternative provision (AP) was designed for children and young people of compulsory school age who have been excluded from mainstream or special schools. Its formal recognition marks the latest step in efforts by the English government to respond to continued concerns—expressed by teachers and the public—regarding learners who struggle to engage with the curriculum and/or present social behaviour that is regarded as disruptive or challenging.

Throughout the last 20 years, many authors have continued to highlight several major areas of concern relating to the practice of implementing AP. They include the variable of the quality of AP; a lack of clearly defined success criteria at the outset; the weakness of monitoring (Institute of Education & National Foundation for Educational Research, 2014); the absence of high-quality professional development for staff in AP settings (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017) and, lastly, the need for a more personalised approach to curriculum design and teaching and learning in response to individual student need (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017). In this short article, I want to reflect on the last of these, drawing on the observations of my informal group of school leaders for illustrative purposes.

These discussions, largely informal, build on an earlier (unpublished) study regarding promising practices in AP undertaken in 2020. What follows are extracts from this, supplemented by additional narratives from 2023 and 2024. In this instance, they focus on just one of the themes—that of curriculum design and learning and teaching—that have been highlighted as indicative of good practice in four recently published reports (see Centre for Social Justice, 2018; DfE, 2018, 2024; Valdebenito et al., 2018). These authors indicate AP good practices in at least six thematic areas:

- supporting positive behaviour
- engaging with parents/families
- skilling and insulating teachers and teaching assistants (TAs)/professional development
- leadership
- connecting with other stakeholders
- curriculum design and teaching and learning

My sources comprise a convenience/opportunity sample of 10 school leaders whom I have encountered over the last five years during a range of teaching and research interactions. My selection was based on two factors: (a) that the school leader had been in post for at least three years in England and (b) my previous interactions with them had indicated that they were professionally involved in AP, either in an alternative setting itself or in some associated form of mainstream provision. School leaders from both primary and secondary phases were involved. Following a personal invitation, which outlined the purpose of my enquiry, I invited them to talk about curriculum delivery in AP. Each conversation followed a loosely structured interview schedule, comprising six open-ended questions relating to curriculum practices in AP, based upon their own professional experiences and personal opinions. The questions related to:

- What do you do that is noticeably different?
- What do you do to secure curriculum engagement?
- Does this require specific/different professional skills?
- Can you talk through a typical learning encounter?
- How do you make use of existing information regarding student learning?
- Are there any differences in the way that learning is tracked?

My ad hoc group of informants gave their permission for audio recordings to be made and for their observations to be used anonymously in this piece. Each school leader was allocated a participant ID. The interviews mostly lasted for about 45 min, although one extended to just beyond 60 min. Conversation transcripts were subsequently cleaned to remove all personal data prior to analysis. Description-focused coding, using NVivo, was then undertaken, alongside manual keyword/phrase analysis (see Figure 1).

SCHOOL LEADERS' VIEWS ON THE AP CURRICULUM

Children and young people in AP often have a quite different curriculum experience from those in mainstream settings, with greater emphasis placed on a vocational, activity-based curriculum in AP. Recent literature suggests that the curriculum should be designed based on a comprehensive assessment of individual students so that their learning needs can be more effectively met (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017). Some literature suggests that curriculum inputs should focus on core skills—for instance, maths and English— followed later by a vocational programme (Kendall et al., 2003). Others stress the importance of focusing on personal behaviours and conflict resolution in the design of curricula (Valdebenito et al., 2018). These interventions target student motivation by training them in practical skills to deal with anger, resolve conflict and be more confident in social interactions with both peers and adults (Mills & Thomson, 2018).

Topic	Content	Senior Leader Case
Curriculum Content	Flexible curriculum	1, 3, 4
	Not 'more of the same'	2,6,7,9,10
	Focus on functional skills	4, 8
	Focus on literacy & numeracy	4,8,9
	SEL embedded in lessons	2,5,6,7,8,9
Organisation & Planning	Nurture groups	2,10
	Flexible groupings	1,3,4,7,8.9,10
Learning & Teaching	Based on assessment of need	1-4, 6, 8, 9
	Recognising SEND	3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
	Individual learning plans	4, 5, 6,10
	Quality First Teaching	2, 3, 7, 8, 9
	Differentiated lessons	1, 2, 6
	Adapted teaching styles	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Changing modes of assessment	4
	Inclusive pedagogy	1-3, 5, 7-9
Curriculum extension	Vocational subjects	4, 8
	Extra-curricular engagement/input	5
	'Real-life' learning	4, 8, 9
	Transitions	2, 3, 5, 10
Co-production	Involving students in planning	3,7
	Involving community	2, 3, 7, 9
	Involving parents, carers, families	1, 2, 6, 7, 8,10
Relationships and culture	Clearly defined leadership vision	1, 3, 4, 7, 8
	Provides opportunity for success	2, 5

FIGURE 1 Effective curriculum practices for students in AP: Key themes from senior leader interviews.

The school leaders I talked with emphasised getting the curriculum right, whether in terms of its content and relevance or the way that it is taught. This is especially important given the correlation observed in the cases between exclusion and this group of students. There is a recognition that quality-first teaching lies at the heart of engaging students who are at risk of exclusion. Senior Leader 1 said:

'Our bread and butter is in making learning engaging for the children, making it relevant and making them see a link between it and to the community. And we must give them the opportunity to apply what they've learned in a real-life context'.

The philosophy underpinning this commitment is based on an inclusive approach to curriculum delivery, which recognises that students who are at risk of exclusion present additional challenges yet are entitled to access the same learning opportunities as all other students:

'We engage with our curriculum in a way that maybe is slightly different from lots of other places in that we look at the end goal, at the objective and where we want the children to be. Sometimes it might be that for individual children, at risk of exclusion, they get to that point in a different way'.

(Senior Leader 3)

These senior leaders emphasised the promotion of readiness to learn. It is a substantial feature in the work undertaken in cases where disengagement from formal learning has been chronic on account of personal trauma. One AP leader (Senior Leader 4) stated:

'For various reasons, we've got high levels of children who suffer from anxiety and attachment issues and hypervigilance and some co-morbidity with those conditions, so our approach is about a nurture approach, a trauma-sensitive approach and a therapeutic and restorative approach'.

Central to nurturing is establishing appropriate conditions for learning to take place. Enabling access by establishing a curriculum-focused nurture group was illustrated by one discussant, who stated:

'We run two access classes. Access One primarily focuses predominantly on younger children, Years 7/8, and feels like a primary classroom … There [are] a lot of reward[s]. It's a fun place for children to learn. Access Two is focusing primarily on the older children and is much more about personalising their curriculum. It is the key part of our inclusion agenda is the access curriculum'.

(School Leader 4)

This was amplified by another account in which the school leader stated:

'Our most at-risk learners, possibly our lowest achievers, are in a group with a specialist primary school teacher who teaches their maths and English in a very small group, very supportive but firm environments. And she's a little classroom that's kind of almost like a primary classroom, and she uses primary strategies to try and speed them up into Key Stage Three'.

(School Leader 1)

A proactive use of nurture spaces in schools, therefore, appears to be recognised and used as a feature of effectively intervening in the curriculum; it is an explicit recognition of the link between behaviour and learning. Such arrangements are most effective when they are seen as constructive, non-punitive interventions that provide students with essential skills and establish their readiness to learn. This was described at secondary school level:

'I think one of the things one would see going into an access curriculum is what a happy environment it is; it feels positive. It's … not punitive in any way. But there are expectations, and the behaviour tolerances are very fixed … poor behaviour is not tolerated. So, it's about learning, but it's learning in a very familiar comfortable environment where the children can be given the best conditions to thrive'.

(School Leader 2)

A curriculum focus was also illustrated in nurture examples in other narratives:

'Nurture groups in 7 and 8 … they are not based on behaviour; they're based on academic attainment. We're very clear on that'.

(Senior Leader 6)

A focus on readiness to learn is thus prioritised by these school leaders, with one confirming:

'I think what we do is we very much look at trying to prevent exclusion initially; so … very much, our curriculum focuses on developing relationship skills, social skills, personal skills with all our pupils'.

(School Leader 8)

The importance given to this is echoed by another school leader:

'It's our job to make sure that every child can access that piece of learning and that's really important for us for a start and it's not just about complex learners it's about all the learners in the school it's got to be something that's interesting and relevant and excites and will develop those children because that's the most important thing'.

(School Leader 7)

Another stated unequivocally '*The key for us is that the curriculum is completely personalised*' (School Leader 4). Senior Leader 7 stated that this could be defined by:

'Recognising the individual, building relationships, being at the heart of what we do. In terms of the broader curriculum, that's what underpins it. You would see that at the start of the day right through to every lesson. Every interaction with a child is an opportunity for every intervention so that sort of the bedrock of what we do on top of that we try and take as a personalised approach to their curriculum in terms of subjects'.

An individualised approach, based on teachers and TAs establishing effective relationships with students who have had negative curriculum experiences linked to special educational needs and/or disabilities or who have become disengaged, is a paramount aspect of securing buy-in. For example, there is an understanding that even where a student has difficulty with a curriculum subject, the connection that has been established between the pupil and the teacher/TA can often be the key to engagement:

'So, with maths … it's more about his relationship with the child than it is about the subject that he's trying to teach, and [about] it's creating that learning environment where they're going forwards together and they're both playing the game'.

(Senior Leader 5)

Recognition of individual needs is based on rigorous attention to assessing the special educational needs of

students and connecting these to planned inputs that relate to them. This emphasis is directly linked to making students more resilient:

> 'I think what we do is we very much look at trying to prevent exclusion initially, so … very much our curriculum focuses on developing relationship skills social skills personal skills with all our pupils'.
>
> (Case Study D)

A focus on individual students requires schools to be flexible in providing curriculum experiences that are responsive to the needs identified. For example, a school leader observed:

> 'We don't shy away from an academic curriculum, but it is very much complemented with a range of vocational courses, and there are therapeutic interventions that at the start of the programme for any student involve their family in the workings of what we do at the centre'.
>
> (Case Study L)

Adaptation and flexibility are terms that are frequently used to summarise the approach to curriculum delivery in AP. This is illustrated by one senior leader who noted: *'Our curriculum is always changing every single year as our students change. We must be flexible'* (Senior Leader 2). Behaviour and learning are symbiotic aspects of learning and teaching (Ellis & Tod, 2009). The school leaders I spoke with presented a powerful argument that addressing curriculum issues in isolation from students' social and behavioural needs and expectations is an unworkable approach with students who are at risk of exclusion:

> 'We recognise that our children won't engage with learning and in the learning process unless they can see the bigger picture. They need to know why they need to know this or that. It needs to bear a relationship to their own lives'.
>
> (Senior Leader 9)

Making adjustments to curriculum content and teaching is regarded by these schools as fundamental to making students who are at risk of exclusion more secure as learners. The significance of this is acknowledged by Senior Leader 3, who stated:

> 'The curriculum here is as rich as it possibly can be, and again, that's because we want children to go home smiling. We want children to go home enthused. We want children to want to get out of bed and come to school'.

There is also a recognition that an inclusive approach to the curriculum, while being a cornerstone of effective provision, must be clearly understood as a systemic issue. This is well illustrated by the focus placed on effective engagement with parents in supporting student learning. School Leader 6, provided an example of this, stating:

> 'Homework for our most vulnerable students—that is where we feel the gap widens … it's the support they're getting at home in independent learning, particularly in KS3 … that's where we see the gap … we're doing a lot of work on what we set for homework … because students who are the most vulnerable don't do their homework and it's a vicious cycle … they come in, they haven't done it. It's the cause of confrontation'.

Curriculum arrangements in AP are often devised in collaboration with non-mainstream or vocational provision. This small group of school leaders indicated that inclusive education must be understood as a system-wide concept in which a range of providers can contribute to the curriculum. Explaining this position, Senior Leader 10 stated:

> 'We do have children who have such awful needs … we will do our best. We'll do our very, very best but … what we really want to be doing is thinking more about an inclusive system … I always say if I had, say, some real medical issue, say I needed to have a knee replacement or something like that, I wouldn't want to go to a cancer hospital. If I was directed to such a place, this is not helping me solve my knee problem'.

System-wide inclusive practices to address the needs of students at risk of exclusion are widely recognised by the school leaders I spoke with and further illustrate their flexible approach to curriculum delivery. Those settings that have a proactive, curriculum-led relationship with alternative providers are often better placed to make strategic decisions that ensure learning continuity for the student: for example, one school leader noted:

> 'When we did reach that stage [of potential exclusion], we were able to secure that child a place at an alternative provision that would meet their needs in a managed process to avoid negative curriculum impacts. It almost mirrors [the] effective practice of early intervention'.
>
> (Senior Leader 7)

This approach, in its various forms, is demonstrably underpinned by awareness of major developments relating to the entitlement of all learners to an education. For

instance, one of the schools was actively working towards the 'Rights Respecting School' award, administered by UNICEF UK, so that *'children are empowered to become active learners and active local and global citizens'* (Senior Leader 2).

SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The school leaders I spoke with in this informal study held a strong personal commitment to students at risk of exclusion. They were all directly and actively involved in many of the procedures relating to the support of these students, emphasising their belief that the school as a community brings with it a recognition that students have a diverse range of individual characteristics and personalities. This requires flexibility and adaptation of the curriculum from a school leader as well as a collective understanding that behaviour and learning are inseparable. The leaders participating in the study highlighted their vision that collective responsibility for students at risk of exclusion should be central to decision-making and the actions taken. It was apparent, in these conversations, that school leaders are the essential catalyst in securing inclusion for all. Ultimately, as one participant observed, the school leader is in a position of *'mediating trust'*, stating that *'the trust that I talk about, is very much a part of connecting with our students—that's the point, they are where my real responsibility lies'* (School Leader 4).

It was also notable that this small group of school leaders cast doubt on what seems to have been a quest for silver bullet solutions for students at risk of exclusion. Moreover, their commentaries suggest that what they are attempting to achieve, in curricular terms, represents a reiteration of much of what has been historically advocated and deemed efficacious throughout the last 50 or more years. That in 2024 we are still seeking solutions to the curriculum challenges experienced in AP—both by teachers and students—suggests that substantial gaps remain between practitioner know-how and official policy and expectation. Action to close them is now needed more than ever before.

FUNDING INFORMATION

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Ethical Approval received from the University of Northampton Research Ethics Committee.

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