Lost before Lockdown – the Hidden Generation Let Down by Compulsory Schooling

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Abstract

The closing of UK schools to most children during the Covid 19 outbreak on an unprecedented scale, not even witnessed during the World War conflicts, caused ripples of panic across the UK. The risk to the future life chances of children and young people caused the nation to respond, from celebrities teaching children online to footballers influencing government policy. The risks associated with inaccessible school proved an unbearable thought to many. Yet the last decade has witnessed thousands of children and young people being unable to access school. These children and young people have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), despite harrowing media stories about children being socially isolated with their future unknown, the country did not respond. Policy interventions by successive UK governments, since the late 1970’s have continued to be embedded with the intention of inclusion and reaching potential – yet many of the children at the centre remain invisible and forgotten. This research considers how policies, politicians, and educational professionals speak of children as a collective, yet fail to see the generation lost before lockdown.

Keywords  Special educational needs · Exclusion · Covid 19 · Education · School closures

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (Covid 19) and the necessity to distance people from each other left leaders from across the nations of the UK with no alternative but to put the countries into lockdown. Across the devolved nations of the UK, decisions about education are made differently, for the purpose of this paper the focus will be on England. In mid-March 2020, schools closed on a scale not experienced in living memory, school was only available to the children of key workers and the most vulnerable children with the protection of an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) or a social worker before the pandemic began (ALLFIE, 2020).

Teachers and school communities rallied to support learning from home at speed, the barriers were multiple. Between March and August of 2020, the stark inequalities that exist
within the English school system and wider society became increasingly apparent. Evidence shows that a child’s social background remains a key determinant of their chances of educational success (Longfield 2020). Consequently, the recognition that school is not just about learning has become publicly recognised. The risks associated with not accessing school are multiple from physical wellbeing in terms of food poverty, mental well-being, social isolation, and the hampering of life chances for the most vulnerable were increasingly being discussed from commentators across all areas of British society (Longfield, 2020). The Chief Medical Advisor Chris Whitty and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, discussed the risk of a deadly virus and the potential to spread the virus into communities, must be balanced against the long-term damage to young people’s future when they are unable to attend school (BBC, 2020).

Additionally, various well-known figures urged the British government to provide resources to save the current generation from losing out on the opportunities and protection that schools offer (BBC, 2020). Paradoxically, despite the political and medical urgency to protect children’s immediate and future life chances by enabling them to physically access school, for thousands of children and young people the coronavirus did not create inaccessible schools. Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) were already impacted by risks associated by an inability to access school and wider support services. The last decade has seen the number of children without a school place rise, in addition to the startling increase in the number of parents home educating (Longfield, 2019). Austerity measures which have cut educational support services; lengthened waiting times for diagnostic testing; and mental health support and the increase in child poverty, are said to be contributing factors (Cullinane, 2020; Longfield, 2019).

This paper will consider English education in a historical context, the in-built stratification and mounting competition that has impacted the school culture. It will go on to consider the problematisation of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) within education. Understanding the social positioning of SEND children and young people, enables a view of the problem beyond the individual. To conclude the research will consider the lessons learned from lockdown and how these provide possible opportunities to create differentiated access to education.

Methodology

This research draws upon secondary data and policy documents to understand how school and thus education are considered differently for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Secondary data allows for an investigation into historic accounts as well as access to more contemporary evidence (Emmel et al., 2018). As social policy is rarely new, it ordinarily builds upon what already exists this method enables a view of the development of education over time. Current education policy and practice is built upon the foundations of past provisions, recognising historic practices can offer new ways of thinking to create positive social change (Priestley & Shah, 2012, Emmel et al., 2018).

Research in education must look beyond the surface of policy claims such as ‘Educational Excellence for all’ (1997) or ‘Educational Excellence Everywhere’ (2016) and understand that ‘we are dealing with complex social interventions which act on complex social systems – things like league tables, performance measures, regulation and inspection, or funding reforms’ (Pawson et al., 2005:21). The policies and the systems within which they function...
must be questioned; who or what is being problematised and how do these policies contribute to this problematisation?

Therefore, Bacchi’s WPR (what’s the problem represented to be?) approach enables to question how problems are framed.

‘WPR provides a systematic methodology to critically question ‘the taken-for-granted assumptions that lodge in government policies and policy proposals by interrogating (problematising) the problem representations it uncovers within them’ (Bacchi, 2009 p. xv, cited in Tawell and Mcluskey 2021).’

In terms of educational research this approach can ‘illustrate that certain ways of thinking about “problems” reflect specific institutional and cultural contexts’ (Bacchi, 2012: no pagination). Bacchi (2012), suggests that researchers can interfere with the way that truths are known. The use of this method intends to disrupt thinking about the provision of education for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England. Urging educational providers and political leaders to consider the response during the pandemic and the benefits of adapting this provision for SEND children.

**Education**

Education in the UK during the post war years functioned upon the relative solidarity felt after the conflict and the national effort to rebuild the country. The idea that all children could access a free education was widely considered a social good, with ‘equality of opportunity as its driving force’ (Forester & Garett, 2012:13). Thus, ‘the 1944 Education Act states that local authorities have a duty to provide education up to the age of 19 for all those that want it’. However, equality on these terms often focuses upon the meritocratic ideal – hard work pays (Ball et al., 1992. Jones, 2016). The Act assumed homogeneity based upon age does. This does not account for an unequal society which ensures that children and young people experience school differently along the lines of class, gender, race, and disability (Forester & Garett, 2012. Ball, 2013. Boronski, Hassan, 2015).

Consequently, the Act did not specify the type of school in which children and young people would receive their education, nor what would happen to those young people deemed not to want education up to the age of 19 (Jones, 2016. Tomlinson, 2017). The grammar schools remained the preferred choice for the middle classes with the bonus of not paying school fees. They dominated this type of provision - except for a small number of working-class young people that broke through (Reay, 2017. Tomlinson, 2017). Most working-class children were educated at comprehensive schools (Ball, 2017). As Slee and Weiner et al., suggest, ‘mass compulsory education was originally established as a system for children’s eventual work and class destination’ (1999:3). Thus, although mass education in England is discussed as meritocratic, the provision and expectations of how young people access their learning remained stratified along classed lines (Jones, 2016. Tomlinson, 2017).
School Improvement

History is crucial to the understanding of schooling in different periods, which change dependent upon societal and political priorities (Jones, 2016). This is evident when there is an economic downturn or a rise in unemployment, such as the oil crisis in the late 1970’s (Forester & Garett, 2012). When schools are not seen to be succeeding in their role, ‘the state steers at a distance by articulating within its various departments strategic goals which have to be achieved by those down the line responsible for delivering the service’ (Slee et al., 1998:89).

Consequently, the standardisation of education gained momentum in the late 1980’s with the introduction of the national curriculum, the framework provides a prescriptive list of subjects with measurable outcomes (Boronski, Hassan, 2015. Jones, 2016. Tomlinson, 2017). These outcomes are then published in the form of league tables, creating competition within and between schools. Schools are ranked for many things including results, how much ‘value’ is added to a child’s attainment since starting that school, behaviour, and attendance. Successfully meeting the government set targets contributes to schools receiving a positive rating (Benn, 2012. O’Brien, 2016). Thus, the increasing competition in recent decades have shifted priorities in schools and additional demands ‘mounting anxiety, public and political concern over standards resulting in demands for educational reform and greater accountability of schools and teachers’ (Forester & Garett, 2012:14). The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspections that were introduced in the 1990’s added to these anxieties.

During the 1980’s and thus the Thatcher era, neo-liberal thinking of a small welfare state and a reliance upon the free market infiltrated the education system (Forrester, Garett. 2012). This created children, young people and their parents as consumers and educational professionals as service providers (Boronski, Hassan, 2015. Ball, 2017). Accordingly, the marketisation of education continued, the introduction of Multi Academy Trusts (MATS) during the 1990s was set to promote more competition and choice into the sector as a cost-effective way of achieving excellent results, expanding choice for parents and young people and taking the provision of education further away from Local Authorities (Ball, 2017. Tomlinson, 2015). MATs receive state funding, but they set their own admissions criteria, have more autonomy over what they teach and set their own behaviour policies (O’Brien, 2016. Ball, 2017).

Obviously, for families with the social and economic resources to compete for the best university places, an outstanding Academy setting its own rules for excellence, can indeed be worth the additional investment to secure a place at an outstanding school (Benn, 2012. Tomlinson, 2017). League tables provide parents with the information that they need to secure the best school and having this information helps to inform choice. Many parents go to great lengths to secure a school ranked excellent, such as buying a new or second home close to their preferred school’s catchment area or having their child baptised to ensure they have the best opportunities that education can afford them (Tomlinson, 2016. Boronski, Hassan. 2015). ‘Neo-liberalism incites us to compete’ (Ball, 2013:134) and parents with the knowledge and resources to compete can indeed ensure that their children access all possible opportunities.

Despite the prescribed age-related measures of success, children are not identical, standardisation can create many children as ‘problems’ (Bacchi, 2012:no pagination). As
O’Connor and Fernandez suggest, ‘instead of recognising expression of development as culturally specific, it situates middle-class white children as the unmarked norm against which the development of “other” children is evaluated’ (2006:6). Therefore, raising standards agendas make several assumptions like those in the post war years, the first being that children are a homogenous group based upon age. Secondly, that schools will have the same resources to implement changes and continue to compete and Local Authorities will have the resources to provide funds to support children who are unable to perform in the system. Accordingly, when resources are sparse or the school ethos is focussed upon competition and not the whole child, rather than improving education ‘constantly raised standards…are…a useful tool for manufacturing inability’ (Tomlinson, 2017: p92). Arguably the unintended consequences of these policy interventions are to make those who for a variety of reasons do not meet the prescribed standard the problem.

Consequently, the culture and competition of schooling can impact the child’s sense of well-being and belonging, and often ‘leads to feelings of being out of place, which effects confidence as well as competency to engage and participate in lessons’ (Brown, 2018, in Gilbert, 2018:p52). This can also be true of many parents, where their own experiences of schooling were not positive and the benchmarks of success in their generation were unattainable, re-engaging with the system for their children can be problematic (Jones, 2016. Boronski, Hassan 2015. Gilbert, 2018). The current benchmark of success for young people is to achieve Grade 4 or above in at least five subjects, the new system of grading in numbers began in 2018 and replaces the grading system of Grade A*-C (BBC, 2019). Research shows that young people who do not attain these grades, will face significant challenges such as being not in employment, education, or training (NEET), more likely to live in poverty as adults and a greater risk of entering the Criminal Justice system (Tomlinson, 2017. Ball, 2017).

However, where these prescribed benchmarks of success are not reached the risk does not stop at the young person, schools need to maintain these standards to ensure they maintain or improve their place within the league tables, to recruit the next intake of young people and avoid government scrutiny (Ball, 2017). Therefore, ‘top-down pressure through regimes of statutory testing, regular OFSTED visits and local and national league tables inevitably decrees those classrooms become less child-centred and more target driven’ (Butcher et al., 2009:68). When speaking of improvement, it is important to understand what needs to be improved. In the conservative manifesto of 2010, the priority was to ‘reform education, with new schools – and higher standards and improved discipline for all’ (2010:35). As Tomlinson suggests; ‘schools in England by the second decade of the twenty-first century were examination factories’ (2017:91), therefore, rather than creating educational improvement for all, the improvement agenda focussed upon the white middle-class ideal has created a system where a huge proportion of young people struggle to compete (Slee, 2011. Tomlinson, 2017).

Hence, as Gilbert states;

‘for many of these children, school is a place where they don’t belong, where their voices aren’t heard and where their interests are ignored…the abnormality is not with them but the system’ (2018:10).

This section has discussed the competitive nature of schooling, the complexities and anxieties that have emerged because of striving for success. Arguably, the competition is made simpler when access to the resources that are compatible with the expectations of schooling. When schooling and its importance is discussed, in terms of improving standards and ensuring all children can succeed and have access to smooth life
transitions. There remains one group of children that are invisible within this thought. The next section will discuss the development of special educational needs as a category and the international quest for inclusive schooling as a human right.

From Segregation to Policies of Inclusion

Historically, the segregation of disabled children and the ‘least intellectually able in special schools’ (Slee et al. 1999:3) was the norm, children and young people were separated based upon their main impairment for example, children with a hearing impairment would be placed in a school in a school for the deaf (Priestley & Shah, 2012. Tomlinson, 2017). Where a parent wanted their child to be placed in a mainstream school, they needed to challenge the system, critiques of special schools argued that they were less aspirational and therefore provided less chances in further education, employment and were an unnecessary expense to welfare spending (Priestley & Shah, 2012. Barnes et al., 2004). The Warnock report of the late 1970s was an opportunity to change access to mainstream education for disabled children, instead of assuming that children would be assigned a school based upon impairment, the committee intended for children to be educated as a whole person (Butcher et al., 2009. O’Brien, 2016).

Concluding, the Warnock committee found that for most children, inclusion in mainstream school would be more cost effective and socially beneficial for the disabled child and their peers. The motivation for introducing the collective term special educational needs would remove the stigmatised labels attached to impairment, such as ‘educationally subnormal’ (Tomlinson, 2017:36). Thus, the committee believed that ‘the abolition of the categories of handicap, in an effort to remove the labelling which often operated to keep children in special schools’ (Ball et al., 1992:121) would ensure normalisation of difference and be beneficial to wider society. The creation of the umbrella term special educational needs was further set to change the narrative from focusing upon deficits in young people, to looking beyond individual impairment and creating inclusive learning environments in local communities. The committee also accepted that a small minority of young people would still need to attend specialist provision, for these children a statement of need would ensure that support would be provided and funded adequately.

Thus, findings from the report informed The Education Act 1981, and the inclusive schooling agenda began (Haines & Reubain, 2011. Tomlinson, 2017). The theme of developing inclusive learning environments continued and in 1994 The Salamanca Statement created an inclusive education framework reaching a consensus supported by over 90 governments and over 25 international organisations (UNESCO, 1994). The framework was built upon the following agreements;

‘Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning,
Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs, education systems should be designed, and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs,
Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs’ (UNESCO, 1994:viii).
Evidently, the plans laid out in the Salamanca statement, complimented and further developed the intentions of the Warnock Committee. In wider disability policy, many gains had been made by the Disabled people’s movement of the 1970’s, UPIAS – the Union of the physically impaired against segregation. The development of the Social Model of Disability during this time created wider thinking about disability being something that society imposed on top of individual impairment (Barnes et al., 2004). Therefore, rather than focus upon the individual limitations to justify segregation and exclusion, the Disabled People’s movement called for equal access to all areas of life and a commitment to remove societal barriers that prevented disabled people from full participation. Plainly, within the Warnock Report and the Salamanca Statement inclusion and social justice is at the centre of the commitment (Haines & Reubain, 2011. O’Brien, 2016. Tomlinson, 2017).

Consequently, as Ryan (2019) discusses, many disabled children growing up from the late 1980s through to the early-2000s, enjoyed opportunities in education that would have been unheard of in the preceding decades. In 2000 the Labour government had made commitments to reducing child poverty and created specific support through purposeful interventions such as Every Disabled Child Matters (2006). Recognising that schooling does not exist in a vacuum and external inequalities effect children’s learning (Blandford, 2017). These commitments were followed up with economic investments to ensure that the physical makeup of schools was adapted and adequate funding and training for support workers were made available (Ryan, 2019). Although inclusion was often confused with assimilation, where a disabled child is included in the same building but taught separately and not included in all elements of school life with their peers (O’Brien, 2016. Tomlinson, 2017), there were positive changes from the wholly segregated past before the Warnock Report.

**The Children and Families Act 2014**

Despite the gains made from the 1980s some families and educational professional were struggling with the bureaucracy of the SEN system. The Children and Families Act 2014 was set to streamline and accelerate access to support for children with SEND. The policy intention was to all children have access to a meaningful education (Haines & Reubain, 2011. O’Brien, 2016). The Act (2014) changed the types of special educational provision; statements, school action plus and school action were reduced to two categories; SEN support which is provided at school with some advice from external agencies such as speech and language therapy and the statutory document of an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP), which allocates funds to ensure that children and young people can access support up to the age of 25 (GOV.UK, 2020). The EHC plan was set to offer young people and their families legal protection.

Crucially, the changes were set to bring together professionals and thus services from education, health and care would create a rounded approach and access to services beyond the school (O’Brien, 2016). Thus, ‘the primary and important – ‘right’ available in education law to the parents of disabled children is an assessment of SEN and that such assessed needs are met’ (Crowther, 2011 in Haines & Reubain, 2011:53). Local Authorities have a duty to ensure that necessary assessment take place within a 20-week time frame. Children and their families were to have a voice in the process, enabling provision to be conducive to the best interest of the child (Tomlinson, 2017. O’Brien, 2016).
The Plan didn’t Work!

However, the Act and the commitment to merging services and the added expense of extending educational provision from the age of 18 to 25 happened within a different political climate than it was developed (O’Brien, 2016). The global financial crash in 2008 and the commitment by the newly elected coalition government of 2010 to reduce welfare spending meant that rather than investing more money into SEND budgets (NEU, 2019), they were instead reduced. According to the Institute for Fiscal studies, ‘total school spending per pupil in England has fallen by 8% in real terms between 2009 and 10 and 2019–20. The bulk of these funding cuts were driven by a 57% reduction in spending per pupil on services provided by local authorities’ (Britton, Farquharson, et al. 2019: no pagination).

While these funding cuts have not impacted the number of support staff in primary schools, in comparison teaching assistant ‘numbers in secondary schools have fallen by about 13% since 2011’ (Britton et al., 2019: no pagination). The responsibilities placed upon local authorities by the Act to assess for EHCPs and make funding available to ensure that the required support package is delivered has been further ‘compromised by a 49% real-terms reduction in funding since 2010’ (ACDS, 2019:1). Therefore, while the policy intentions within the Children and Families Act were to simplify and expedite support, cuts to the education budgets and local authorities make these intentions more difficult to deliver at the level of provision (O’Brien, 2016).

Plainly, inclusive schooling was not considered a good idea for David Cameron’s government elected in 2010. Despite ratification to international treaties such as the UNCR – Rights of the Child, 1989, The Salamanca statement 1994 and the UNCRPD, 2006 (Haines & Reubain, 2011) and the evidence that showed inclusive mainstream schooling was beneficial to the individual child and wider society. The British people voted for Cameron on an election manifesto that committed to undoing the decades of positive work that had significantly reduced the segregation of disabled children into specialist schools often miles away from home (O’Brien, 2016. Pring, 2019). The Conservative party manifesto reinstated the medical model of disability in education, shifting away from adaptations in mainstream school and thus equality and human rights to the narrative of care, it stated that;

‘The most vulnerable children deserve the very highest quality of care, so we will call a moratorium on the ideologically-driven closure of special schools. We will end the bias towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream schools’ – (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010:53).

Obviously, this approach to SEND children and young people ‘is not to promote the full participation of disabled children but the more limited objective of mitigating ‘learning difficulties’ which too often continue to be seen as intrinsic to the child’ (Crowther in Haines & Reubain, 2011:52). Cameron’s stance on inclusive education focussed upon the consequences of including SEND children into mainstream classroom on the improving standards agenda (O’Brien, 2016. Ball, 2017. Tomlinson, 2017). The intentions of the Warnock Report, The Salamanca Statement and The Children and Families were ignored during this time. SEND children and young people were viewed as the problem, a risk to other children’s educational progress (O’Brien, 2016). Thus, the gains made by the Disabled People’s movement and international treaties during the four decades preceding the 2010 election (Barnes et al., 2004) switched back towards the narrative of care and thus segregation in specialist institutions (Priestley & Shah, 2012).
This section has shown how policy intentions of including children with special educational needs and disabilities can work and be transformative. However, interventions such as this can only work with financial commitment, political will and ideology based upon equality. The next section will focus upon some of the children that are assigned to the category of SEND.

**Special Educational Needs**

The literature relating to special educational needs shows many children and young people who are considered to have a special educational need have no medically diagnosable condition;

‘The Department for Education’s (DfE) definition of SEND in England encompasses all children (or young people up to the age of 25) who have: ‘significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or ... a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post16 institutions.’ (DfE and DH, 2014: in Shaw et al., 2016:6).

Consequently, ‘poverty and SEND are often conflated in schools, with some children as having forms of SEND because of underachievement attributable to cultural and social factors associated with living in poverty’ (Shaw et al., 2016:6). Three examples of special educational needs given by the Department of Education are ‘behaviour or ability to socialise (for example not being able to make friends), ability to understand things and concentration levels’ (DfE, 2014 in Shaw et al., 2016:30). Where a diagnosis is made, O’Connor and Fernandez suggest these can be separated into ‘judgemental and non-judgemental categories’ (2006:6). Broadly they discuss non-judgemental categories as conditions where scientific evidence such as scans and blood test can be used as evidence. ‘Judgemental categories capture subtle disabilities for which there is no organic cause’ (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006:6). Autism Spectrum Condition, ADHD and mental health related problems are suggested to fit into the judgemental category and are diagnosed using professional opinion rather than physical tests these types of difficulty are for some educational professionals much easier to dismiss and often attributed to poor behaviour choices rather than impairment (O’Brien, 2016, Grandin and Panek, 2016, Eaton, 2018).

Therefore, the collectively labelling of special educational needs and disabilities is as problematic as schooling based upon impairment. As recognition must be given to the fact that ‘neo-liberal policy making is augmented with a moral underclass discourse’ (Brown, 2018 in Gilbert, 2018:41). Children in poverty ‘are more likely to develop some form of SEND in childhood and are less likely to move out of SEND categories whilst at school’ (Shaw et al., 2016:4). Research shows that different types of SEND are linked to children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, for example children from low-income families are more likely to experience behavioural issues and social, emotional and mental health conditions and children from wealthier families are more likely to be diagnosed with conditions such as dyslexia’ (Shaw et al., 2016). Thus, in recognising SEND, educational professionals create a judgement of impairment, age-related difference or marking out ‘children who are feeling anxious and invisible and are the victims of poverty’ (Blandford, 2017:20), thus unable to perform in a standardised school system detached from their social reality (Slee, 2011. Gilbert, 2018).
Consequently, when children in poverty reach school they often do not have the tools to fit, their behaviour can be judged and marked out as behavioural difficulties, away from school demands in the context of their ordinary social world, their behaviour would be seen as ordinary (Gilbert, 2018). Robinson (2007) speaks of a young girl who was frequently being disciplined in school for not sitting still in class, her mother felt compelled to pay to see a specialist. Upon speaking to the child and her mother, the doctor turned on some music and stepped outside of the office, the girl began to dance. The doctor advised the mother to enrol the girl at dance class, she did, and the girl grew up to be a successful dancer with her own teaching studio. A different doctor on a different day could have assessed for a hidden impairment such as ADHD and the child would have become ‘label locked’ (Grandin & Panek, 2014:102) and potentially spent a lifetime on unnecessary medication.

Moreover, had the mother not been able to afford to see the doctor quickly or afford dancing lessons, the child would have been marked as the ‘educational other’ (Slee, 2011:88). Far from being a category to end stigma as was intended by the Warnock Committee special educational needs has become an all-encompassing category for those who do not meet the dominant norms of schooling. In some circumstances many consider, ‘special educational needs to be an institutional sleight of hand, a euphemism for the failings of schools’ (Barton in Slee et al., 1998:3). However, we must not view school in a silo, the gains made in reducing child poverty from the beginning of the twenty-first Century have been put into reverse since the welfare spending cuts introduced in 2010 and the number of children being marked as SEND has grown (Blandford, 2017. NEU, 2019). ‘There were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2018–19. That’s 30% of children, or nine in a classroom of 30’ (CPAG, 2019) and this figure is expected to grow. Children in poverty are less likely to meet the growing demands of schooling, and thus more likely to stand out and be assigned to the category of SEND.

This section has discussed how the category of SEND is broad and does not reach its aim of encompassing the needs of all learners in inclusive environment. Rather it can be used as a category to place children who do not fit with the norms of schooling for many reasons including the impact of poverty.

The Importance of School Attendance

Monday 23rd March 2020 marked the first day that schools closed to most children to slow the spread of the global pandemic – Covid 19. The only children who were able to access the physical school environment were children of keyworkers, children with a social worker and those with the statutory protection of an EHCP (BBC, 2020, Longfield, 2020). Although, many children with an EHCP were discouraged to attend where parents could manage at home (SNJ, 2020). By June 2020, the media began to focus upon the educational inequalities that were becoming increasingly evident. People began to realise how aligned schooling in England is to the norms of families and schools with the resources to perform well in the system (O’Brien, 2016. Slee, 2011). What became increasingly evident in terms of accessing online learning was the schools in the most deprived areas did not have the infrastructure to transfer to online learning (Longfield, 2020, BBC 2020).

Additionally, many children learning from home did not have the technology to do so, despite government promises to provide laptops for the most disadvantaged pupils to access their learning, only a third received them. Many schools quickly created workbooks
to ensure that children could still learn. Many schools became a lifeline during the crisis delivering not just educational supplies but also food. Schools in the most affluent areas did not have to manage the same risks. They were able to continue learning and transferred live lessons online and these parents had the resources to ensure that education continued (Cowburne, 2020).

Consequently, inaccessible schooling prompted responses from all areas of society, Anne Longfield the Children’s Commissioner shared her concerns ‘about a deepening educational disadvantage gap. Leaving millions of children without education which they need to progress in life’ (Dixon, 2020: no pagination). These concerns were shared by many famous faces from across the country, the idea that children should miss out on education and have their life chances reduced seemed unthinkable. Prompting the likes of Sir David Attenborough and Professor Brian Cox to develop lessons on the BBC’s learning platform Bitesize (BBC, 2020). Many more famous faces followed, and young people were afforded the opportunity to access the teachings of world experts freely (BBC, 2020).

Moreover, on ‘Sunday 19th April, the launch of Oak National Academy was announced. An ‘online’ classroom and resource hub, was created and developed by a consortium of teachers in partnership with the Department for Education in a matter of weeks’ (Cullinan, 2020: no pagination). The England footballer Marcus Rashford’s concerns about another risk associated with missing school – food poverty. This concern led him to successfully challenge the government into keeping the voucher scheme that had been given to families entitled to free school meals throughout the summer. This success meant that the poorest families received £15 per week per child to combat hunger during the traditional school holiday period (BBC.CO.UK, 2020).

Evidently, the concern for the future life chances of children associated with missing school was not just the focus of celebrities, teachers, the Children’s Commissioner and the Department of Education, the subject received further attention from the medical profession, one paediatrician told the Guardian;

‘It is our most vulnerable children, such as those from disadvantaged families or those with additional needs, who may suffer most. Getting children safely back into education as soon as we can has to be a priority if we are to avoid further damage to the health, wellbeing, and life chances of so many of our young people’ (Marder, 2020 in Adams, 2020).

More colleagues from the profession contributed, Russell Viner, the President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and his committee wrote to the Prime Minister. They urged him to plan urgently to get all children back to school stressing that; ‘Schools are vital to the wellbeing of children and young people, providing a range of services from vaccinations to mental health support’ (Adams, 2020: no pagination). The then Education secretary continued to emphasise the risks of children missing out on school, penning a letter in the Guardian he urged parents to send children back to school as soon as they opened saying;

“If a child is not in school, they stand to lose far more than just a few months of learning. It could well put a huge dent in their future life chances,” (Williamson, 2020: no pagination).

Evidently, in these terms school is not just a place to gain qualifications and opportunities for further study and employment, it is also a welfare safety net. Which provides food, access to health services and social support. This section has considered the panic that school closures caused, and the risks associated with inaccessible schooling. The next
section will consider the invisible children unable to access any of the protection that school can afford. It will also consider why there has been no prominent speakers urging for social change in concern for their future life chances.

**A Crisis in SEND**

Paradoxically, the concerns about missing school raised by some of the most prominent figures in British society had not previously been extended to SEND children. Many of whom have been missing out on education for many years. The increasing zero tolerance behaviour policies; lack of local authority powers over MATS; over a billion-pound deficit in funding and the decision to end the bias towards inclusion without opening enough specialist school places has created a perfect storm (ACDS, 2019. NEU, 2019. O’Brien, 2016).

Despite the intentions of the Children and Families Act 2014 to remove barriers to early support for SEND children and their families, in 2019 the House of Commons Education Committee found that the families of SEND children were stuck in a ‘treacle of bureaucracy’ (Richardson, 2019:no pagination). Moreover, since 2014 the system was found to be failing ‘a generation of young people, who were not given the support they deserved’ (Richardson, 2019). Findings from the House of Commons education Committee after a lengthy consultation of the provision of SEND, concluded that economic waste and poor administrative functions means that financial investment is not enough, a cultural shift is necessary.

However, as discussed in the literature the ideological standpoint of the current government is to reinstate specialist provision. Reversing the gains made in inclusive education and the cost effectiveness that affords. Currently there are more children considered to need specialist schooling than the capacity available.

‘Current restrictions on local authorities’ ability to create new specialist settings does nothing to improve the experiences of young people with SEND and leads to more pupils entering the independent sector at significant cost to the taxpayer’ (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019:3).

The independent sector can offer smaller class sizes and greater access to external support services. At the start of the academic year of 2019 over 8500 SEND children were awaiting a school place. More than a million more, were not receiving adequate support to access education (NEU, 2019). This was further discussed in the House of Commons Select Committee, (2019) who recognised that the local authority in which a child lived determined what support they would receive, whether they would be issued with an EHCP and whether external services would be available. ‘There is too much tension between the child’s needs and the provision available’ (House of Commons education committee, 2019: 3).

Evidently, services are not equitable for all SEND children and are only accessible where a local authority has funding and services available. Local authorities with the greatest level of need serve SEND children less well, leaving the most vulnerable with little support (NEU, 2019). The SEND reforms happened at a time when schools, local authorities and health and care services were feeling the strain of welfare spending cuts imposed since 2010 (Ryan, 2019. Weale, 2019). Local authorities remain responsible for the education of SEND children – yet have little jurisdiction over academies and the private sector. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the new laws are broken, and a blame culture has emerged (Weale, 2019. House of Commons Education committee, 2019). The challenges faced by
the children and their families, and the fact that laws have been broken are not unknown. Ofsted have said that they cannot intervene on unlawful practices (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019). Yet a report into missing children by the Children’s Commissioner in 2019 revealed that Ofsted were investigating unlicensed schools. They made reports where schools were not fully implementing the governments Prevent strategy to combat terrorism (Longfield, 2019).

Clearly, Ofsted can intervene in legal matters, but if a report is produced interventions would have to be made. Slee, introduces us to the concept of ‘collective indifference’ (2011:48), something that we know is happening but neither accept nor challenge. Allowing knowledge of injustice into the individual conscience would compel us to intervene – this is particularly true of policy makers (Priestley & Shah, 2012). Educational professionals, politicians and the media can all see ‘the ways in which collective indifference to the excluded operates in and is sustained by schools’ (Slee, 2011:48). Ofsted have previously recognised that with adapted pedagogy many children would not be recognised as SEND. These children have not been made a priority in Ofsted’s inspection framework (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019). Therefore, it is not that the challenges faced by SEND children or the unlawful practices are unknown a decision has been made to look the other way.

This section has shown that despite the panic and attention focussed upon children being unable to access schools during the pandemic, the people who exist to champion people’s rights have not been as determined to intervene for SEND children, despite the evidence of inaccessible schooling rising over several years. The next section will discuss how some children exit their schooling early.

We don’t Want them here

Unchallenged illegal practices blight the life chances of SEND children, one such practice is termed off-rolling. Ofsted’s definition of off rolling is

‘the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without the use of a permanent exclusion, when primarily in the best interest of the school, rather than the best interest of the pupil. This includes pressurising a parent to remove their child from the school roll’ (Owen, 2019:no pagination).

In 2019, an Academy Trust which serves the families of Leeds were referred to Ofsted following leaking of minutes from a school meeting being leaked to the media. The document showed that the school team were considering keeping several final year GCSE students back a year until a place in alternative provision was available to boost the schools league tables. The team discussed the group of young people as;

‘students who for whatever reason have not been able to achieve consistently. They have poor outcomes, likely poor attendance and also in significant danger of becoming NEET’ (Roberts, 2019:no pagination).

This group of young people are extremely restricted in their options, are at significant risk of living in poverty and becoming involved with the criminal justice system (O’Brien, 2016. Tomlinson, 2017). Obviously, this is ‘problematising’ (Bacchi, 2012: no pagination) the young person rather than the system that fails them. Confirming that ‘a culture of exclusion at both the policy and practice levels of education provision’ exists (Barton,
Despite the current national consensus that inaccessible schools hamper life chances, exclusion can be justified to compete in the market of education. As Bauman suggests;

‘the concept of responsibility and responsible choice, which used to reside in the semantic field of ethical duty and moral concern for the ‘other’ have moved and been shifted to the realm of self-fulfilment and calculation of risk’ (2009:52).

Evidently, the pressures upon schools to perform well in the league tables can take priority over the life chances of the child. However, by locating the reason to be excluded both within and beyond the school building or ‘beliefs in child-deficit educational problems’ (Graham et al., 2016:493), the school system can continue without conscience. As Slee (2011) suggests, ‘looking away is a human reflex when our sensibilities are confronted. It is habitual and after time, simply no longer recognised’ (Slee, 2011:38), these young people are viewed as holding the school back, thus providing justification to reducing their life chances.

Obviously, the behaviour of one Academy Trust cannot be seen to be representative of all schools. However, the practice of off rolling to skew results has become evident to the Children’s Commissioner, who investigated the trend of young people leaving the school roll before their exams (Longfield, 2019). Research shows that ‘over 55,000 children were removed from secondary school rolls in England in 2017 for unexplained reasons, up from 47,000 in 2011’ (Tolley, 2019: no pagination). Those ‘eligible for free school meals, are known to children’s social care and from certain ethnic backgrounds are all at greater risk of being moved as are pupils with social emotional or mental health needs’ (Tolley, 2019:no pagination) are more likely to exit the school system early. Off-rolling effectively shifts the responsibility of the young person’s education to somewhere else, sometimes this may be another school, a specialist provision or onto the parent. Where the responsibility is shifted to parent’s they are often convinced that home education is the best option to avoid prosecution for poor school attendance or social services involvement to investigate their child’s behaviour (O’Brien, 2016. ACDS, 2018. Longfield, 2019). Where little support is available to a child experiencing mental health issues such as school induced anxiety, ‘some parents are pressured into having to choose elective home education as a way of instantly removing their child from a stressful school environment’ (ACDS, 2018:5).

The lack of central or local government control over Multi Academy Trusts, such as how they implement behaviour policy, curriculum, and uniform policies can be problematic. Children who need adaptations such as time out, or flexible uniform policy for sensory issues contradicts many academies ethos of zero tolerance. The child conforms or will be marginalised until they can no longer tolerate the school environment (Robinson, 2007. O’Brien, 2016). Not all parents have the resources to challenge discriminatory behaviour and have limited choice but to home educate, the idea that this decision is somehow ‘elective’ is fundamentally wrong (ACDS, 2018).

However, ‘there has been a trend of young people being electively home educated with more complexity of need, particularly with emotional, health and well-being needs’ (ACDS, 2018:9). Reasons being given for the increasing number of children with special educational needs finding school inaccessible cover a wide spectrum but include cuts to ‘pastoral care, speech and language therapists…and…delays in providing mental health support for pupils who need it’ (Speck, 2020: no pagination). Schools wanting to free themselves of the responsibility of teaching children who do not meet current educational standards is not a new phenomenon. In the nineteenth Century the problem of what to do with ‘children who were neither idiots or imbeciles, but merely regarded as dull, feeble
minded and troublesome’ (Tomlinson, 2017:33), was remedied by exclusion or segregation often with the support of medical officers (Tomlinson, 2017). This has little changed in the twenty-first Century, these children pose a risk to standards and as Bauman says;

‘the harsh demands of professional survival all too often confront men and women with morally devastating choices between the requirements of their career and caring for others’ (2009:58).

Controversially, despite the investigations, media focus and the increasing number of children leaving education before exams. The only response from government, has been the argument that they are investing in SEND (NEU, 2019). Where a child is ‘off-rolled’ or a parent ‘electively’ home educates to protect the child’s well-being. Access to extended services such as school meals stop. Parents are expected to pay for any tuition or learning resources that are needed. Despite evidence to suggest that poverty and SEND often overlap and many of these families cannot afford to give their child opportunities or pay legal fees to challenge discrimination (SNJ, 2020). There has been little societal response. ‘We get active if the right music or film star shames us into giving a damn’ (Slee, 2013:897), such as Rashford’s intervention on food poverty during the summer break. However, there have been no celebrities shaming governments and schools into action for SEND children. Rather the individualisation of the problem continues. Until we see these children and tackle the structural inequalities that are disabling young lives schooling in England will not change for them (Slee, 2011. O’Brien, 2016).

This section has shown that the schooling system in England is focussed so heavily upon competing in the market that children’s life chances are in a long list of priorities and not the main focus. It has further shown that when problems can be individualised justification for exclusion exists even when laws are broken. The next section will discuss how the pandemic has given the opportunity to consider education and school separately and offer some hope for those on the margins.

**Learning in Lockdown**

The period of national lockdown gave parents and young people space to reflect upon their experiences of the school environment and the possibilities of learning without pressure (SNJ, 2020. Barnardo’s, 2020). Without the pressures of school, many children have progressed in their learning and have more positive mental health. For example;

*One parent who’s six-year-old daughter is recognised as having special educational needs in school told ITV reporters that ‘lockdown gave her daughter the opportunity to share her worries about school, the loud noises and pressure from other children mean that school is not a happy place for this little girl. Since lockdown her anxiety has decreased and her learning has progressed greatly’* (Binley & Patel, 2020:no pagination).

Despite commitments to focus upon supporting children’s mental health, school remains an anxious place for many children, as already discussed for some children school is not somewhere, they belong or feel heard. Moreover, the conflicting priorities between performance and well-being as evident in this research creates an environment of anxiety.
Speaking in 2012 Education Minister Nick Gibb, ‘dismissed social and emotional learning as ghastly and likely to distract from the core subjects of academic education’ (Northern, 2012:no pagination). In this context, the focus of school is about results, if a child’s strength is not academic, they cannot fit. This has been evident throughout this research. As Grandin and Panek, suggest

‘if a school treats everyone the same, guess what; The person who is not the same is going to stand alone. That person will be marginalised in the classroom and once that happens, it won’t be long before that student is marginalised for good’ (2014:183).

Consequently, rather than school closures causing problems, many SEND children and their families have been able to take control of their own lives. Opportunities have been created to access learning without a battle for support. External appointments have not taken hours to attend and instead have been accessible remotely from home (Morewood, 2020). This has been particularly helpful for children with anxiety or other mental health issues. This is a common reason for SEND children being unable to tolerate the school environment (Eaton, 2019). Evidently, had this been available to SEND young people before lockdown they would not have needed to reach crisis point before receiving support or having to leave formal educations.

Despite the governments best efforts to persuade parents to return their children to school for the good of their long-term life chances. Many parents are happy with their children’s learning and improvement in well-being since schools closed. They are willing to risk the threat of a fine for non-attendance to protect their children’s mental health and potential risk associated with acquiring Covid 19 (Barnardo’s, 2020). Home education has been on the increase for many years, lockdown has given many families the confidence to know that they can manage educating their children and that for many the school environment was the problem (Morewood, 2020).

Evidently, the decrease in anxiety, increased learning and easier access to support services has shown that children who cannot meet the standards of school want to learn. The government should realise that if school causes more anxiety than a pandemic, there is a systemic problem and not a problem with the children and young people involved. As O’Brien suggests,

‘We all have to choose to commit to recognising that society as it is today, is a difficult place for these young people to thrive, to acknowledge this is not right; that such a state of affairs must change; and that we all of a part to play in making that change happen (2016:149).

Moreover, this is not a funding issue, it is one of social justice agreed to in Salamanca in 1994, to provide an education system that enables all children and young to thrive in English society and have a life worth living.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, as this research shows the marketisation of education and the ensuing competition benefits those with the most resources. Families who have the social and economic capitals conducive to the normative standards of the school system can indeed thrive. However, the improving standards agenda encourages competition within and between schools and the top-down agenda creates anxiety for children within school,
those unable to meet the markers of success feel out of place and as failures in a system that problematises them. As history shows the marking out and segregation of disabled children and those living in poverty, is not new, but as was shown in the 1990s and early 2000s is unnecessary.

Inclusive education is historically proven to be more cost effective but requires a shift in culture and commitment to equality. Since 2010 the gains made towards inclusion have been reversed, the commitment to send more children to special schools without providing the funding and facilities has created a situation where SEND children have nowhere to be educated. The result has been those children and their families have left them with no alternative but to home educate. Obviously, this is more challenging for parents without the financial resources or personal education to support their child. Consequently, SEND children have suffered unnecessarily for many years missing out on the opportunities that education can afford them, and no answers or solutions have been offered by government.

However, the coronavirus has shown that when services want to act quickly it is possible. The creation of Oak Academy and the extension of BBC bitesize offers some hope for SEND children that when school becomes inaccessible, educational resources can still be available. In developing these resources further, the government, local authorities and schools could offer early intervention. This would ensure that young people who are too unwell to attend school can continue learning supported at home whilst a fuller support package and a return to school can be organised. The current delays, lack of access to education and the social isolation that occurs when school placements break down, mean create risks to children and young people’s future chances. Maybe, for these changes to be addressed first decision makers must first learn to see SEND children and young people as rights bearing citizens and not problems to be ignored.

Coronavirus has shown many parents that without the anxieties of the physical school environment, their children are happy and able to learn. This government and school policy failed a generation of children before coronavirus existed. If they really want to make school a place that can create opportunities for ‘all’ children, first they must see the problem that has been created within the system. As shown within the literature, cultures have developed such as off-rolling, these cultures mark the child as the problem and justify exclusion. Since the beginning of compulsory education successive governments have focussed upon giving the most opportunities to those who already have them and segregate children who are considered valueless in a capitalist system.

Further research is required of a participatory nature, to rebuild the trust of the group of young people lost before lockdown. This research is urgent to help professionals understand what marginalised young people need at the time of crisis to develop strategies and skills for their future.

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