

Learning difficulties and exclusion from school: a quantitative analysis of data

What we found

By analysing the UK-wide Millennium Cohort Study¹ data, we found that young people with ADHD or behavioural problems, and autism and Asperger’s syndrome experience significantly higher rates of exclusion than those without these conditions. This could potentially be explained by the fact that, for example, symptoms of ADHD are often mischaracterised as persistent disruptive behaviour, according to previous research. In addition, we found positive correlations with exclusion in relation to male gender, playing truant, drug use, police warning and arrest, higher cognitive ability and some minority ethnic backgrounds (mixed, other, Pakistani, black Caribbean).

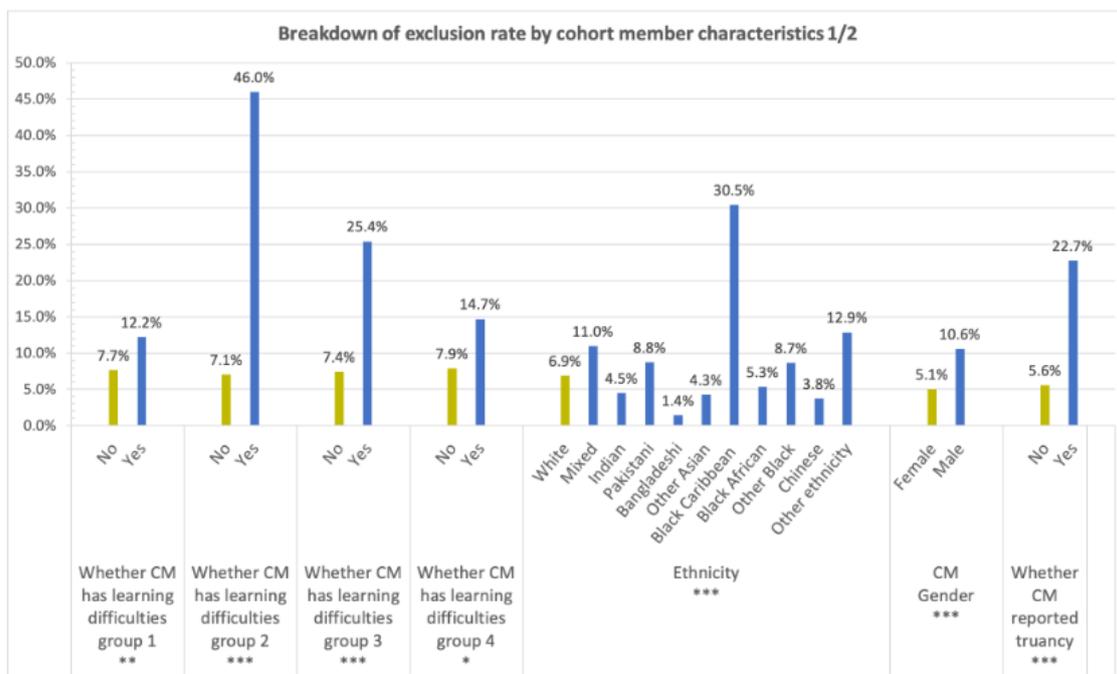


Figure 3. Source: Millennium Cohort Study sweep 6

* significant association at $p < 0.05$, ** significant association at $p < 0.01$, *** significant association at $p < 0.001$

We also noted that the causes of exclusion are multiple and likely to have interrelating and overlaying effects.

Recommendations for future research and policy

Early intervention in the form of screening and assessment for pupils who display challenging or disruptive behaviour could well prove effective in identifying underlying issues which, if left unaddressed, can lead to exclusion.

It would be helpful to carry out a similar analysis on Scottish school pupil data. The inclusion of school-level data including staff expertise in additional support needs (ASN) would be valuable, as would applying a sampling frame focussed on pupils with ASN alone. Mixed methods research including both qualitative and quantitative data would give richer results.

¹ <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/millennium-cohort-study/>

How we carried out the research

Our research method was to apply a binary logistic regression model to sweep 6 of the MCS dataset.² We began by identifying 4 categories of learning difficulties within the data:

- Group 1: Dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia
- Group 2: ADHD and behavioural problems
- Group 3: Autism and Asperger's Syndrome
- Group 4: Speech and developmental problems

By referring to the previous literature, we identified a range of variables that we added in progressively to the model to observe how the effect of learning difficulties on exclusion changed. The variables were in 3 categories: cohort-member specific; parent and household related, and school related.³

Why it matters - our rationale for the research

Scottish school pupil statistics show that the rate of exclusion for pupils with Additional Support Needs (ASN) is almost 5 times that of pupils with no ASN.⁴ At Salvesen Mindroom Centre we hear repeatedly from families that their child with a learning difficulty has been excluded from school. This may occur through the formal process prescribed in the law, or by unlawful or 'informal' means. We wanted to understand what the predictors for exclusion might be, and we chose to explore statistical data for this. We undertook the analysis of sweep 6 of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). This is a UK-wide large dataset that includes data on temporary exclusion from school as well as individual, family and school level data.⁵

The current state of the evidence

Prior to the analysis we considered the literature on exclusion. We established that similar quantitative research has not been carried out before. We also noted that the evidence to date shows that exclusion from school has negative consequences for children and young people, and may include:

- poor educational attainment
- reduced confidence and increased anxiety
- unemployment
- drug use and crime
- mental and physical health issues

Several sources confirm that throughout the UK, pupils with ASN are excluded from school disproportionately. A further risk factor is that of league tables and the pressure to perform, which exacerbates exclusion rates. In addition, boys are more likely to be excluded from school than girls but schools with high quality pastoral care tend to have a lower rate of exclusion.

² Questionnaires were administered in 2015 when the cohort members were 14 years old.

³ A full methodology can be provided on request.

⁴ <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/AttendanceAbsenceDatasets>

⁵ <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/millennium-cohort-study/>