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Think piece on parents, ‘off rolling’ and wavelength methodology: issues for SENCOs

Elizabeth J. Done¹, Helen Knowler², Eleanor Warnes², Beverley Pickett-Jones¹

¹Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth, PL4 8AA.

² Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, St Luke’s Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2LU. Tel. +44 (0)1392 724934. Corresponding author:

elizabeth.done@plymouth.ac.uk

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Abstract

This think piece argues for a novel qualitative methodology that permits social justice researchers, including National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCO) students, to highlight the profound affects of exclusionary school practices for parents of children with SEN and / or disabilities (SEND). Such children are proportionately effected by these practices. The piece was prompted by multi-strand research into ‘off rolling’ (illegal exclusionary practices) in which 53 parents described the process through which their child was removed from roll and their relationship with the school’s SENCO (SEN coordinator). A preview of the latter is given which suggests that SENCOs’ capacity to influence senior leader decision-making around exclusion can be limited. A ‘wavelength methodology’ permits the highlighting of moral injury and provokes difficult questions around school policy, discriminatory practices and SENCO efficacy in minimising exclusion of students with SEND.

Keywords: off rolling; exclusion; methodology; SEND; SENCOs

Introduction

The novel ‘wavelength’ methodology outlined in this think piece is premised on a presupposition that SENCOs will find it difficult to engage in *parrhesia*. In Foucault (2001,

2007), *parrhesia* describes truth telling in situations where the listener is in a position of power but suspends their power to punish. However, this suspension cannot be guaranteed and, consequently, speaking out carries a significant personal risk. In a school context, given the professional interests at stake, a SENCo may feel unable to challenge a head teacher's engagement in illegal exclusionary practices. Similarly, the parents of children and young people with SEND may be ill-equipped or feel unable to contest such school practices. The 'voices' of both tend to be obscured in a policy discourse and political rhetoric around children's rights to inclusion in mainstream education and the expectation that SENCos can readily exercise a capacity for strategic leadership and deliver school-wide inclusive practice. This policy discourse must co-exist with a dominant political 'standards' agenda that has resulted in the routine monitoring of schools' academic performance and publication of performance league tables. The ranking of schools is associated with the marketisation of the education system in England; hence, parents can make an informed choice of their child's school whilst accountability practices directed at head teachers and their staff have proliferated. It is a 'culture of performativity' (Ball 2003) which now prevails, characterised by pressures to deliver 'continual improvement' and discourses of economic efficiency, expediency and realism. As Ball (2003, p.226) argues, an 'ethical retooling' has occurred in the English public sector whereby client need and professional judgement have largely been replaced by 'commercial decision-making' and attention to external scrutiny.

Our research into 'off rolling' (illegal exclusionary school practices) comprises several studies and, to date, has provided head teachers (Done and Knowler 2019; Knowler and Done 2019) and parents with an opportunity to articulate their views on, and feelings about, off rolling. In this think piece, we focus on parental experiences of off rolling and feature data relating, specifically, to their perceptions of their relationship with the school SENCo which clearly contradict hegemonic policy discourse. For Foucault (2007, p.47),

fearlessly speaking the truth is an act of ‘desubjugation’ or of ‘not being governed so much’ (p. 45) and a form of critique; but this assumes that what is said will be heard. Wavelengths vary in this sense as it is their amplitude which determines volume and, for that reason, only purposeful listening will ensure the audibility of some wavelengths. Policy discourse (which here includes statutory guidance, legislation, political rhetoric and professional discourses) works to silence the ‘voices’ of parents and, by its very nature, fails to acknowledge any sense of the ‘moral injury’ (Bernstein 2005; Nash et al. 2013) and suffering (Adorno 1998) associated with off rolling. Hence, a research methodology that foregrounds social injustice and its affective dimension is required. Findings from such a methodology may also offer SENCOs some leverage should they seek to influence school leadership decision-making around exclusionary practices or, indeed, the time allocated to their SENCO role.

I was told she [the SENCO] only gets half a day a week to do all her SENCO work for a school of 1000 where she is the only one doing this job.

Below, we provide an introduction to off rolling in England and discuss the implications for SENCOs before describing the multi-strand research project which underlined the need for development of an alternative ‘wavelength’ methodology. Further illustrational quotations are given throughout. We conclude by summarising the position of SENCOs in relation to off rolling and exclusion as one that might be deemed a paradox ‘of good intentions’ (Popkewitz 2020, p.14) since some are obliged to defend their head teacher’s exclusionary actions in legal proceedings brought by parents despite a commitment to supporting students with SEND.

SENCO was good and caring but most of the time we dealt with the head teacher who was uncaring and lacked understanding and empathy.

Off rolling

‘Off rolling’ is defined by the national school inspectorate in England – the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted 2019a), as the removal of a student from a school roll where removal is in the school’s best interests and not those of the student; unlike ‘permanent’ or ‘fixed term’ exclusions, off rolling is designed to circumvent legal process. Children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are disproportionately affected, as detailed in the recently published Timpson Review on school exclusion (Department for Education [DfE 2019a]). Precise data on the extent of off rolling is unavailable given its illegality but it is estimated that several thousand school students are subject to informal exclusionary practices each year (Bradbury 2018, 2019). Accordingly, Ofsted (2019b) has revised its school inspection criteria and now targets schools for inspection that, statistically, have reported exceptionally high levels of student movement for two consecutive years. Most recently, Ofsted has adopted a policy of naming and shaming those schools where it suspects off rolling to have occurred. The assumption is that schools are seeking to enhance their academic performance data (Ofsted 2019a) in a competitive marketised education system through off rolling; it is discursively constituted as a gaming of the system and the bypassing of statutory guidance on inclusion (Department of Health and Department for Education [DoH and DfE] 2015).

Data from a small-scale survey of teachers undertaken on behalf of Ofsted includes reports that it is not uncommon for schools to exaggerate the severity of behavioural issues in order to justify both formal and informal exclusionary practices (YouGov 2019). Parents (or carers) must be convinced that their child’s behaviours or difficulties warrant removal from the school roll if schools are to avoid risking legal contestation. Another ‘grey area’ is referred to by the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA 2017) as ‘coerced’ home education, rather than ‘elective’ home education, whereby parents or carers are manipulated or pressurised by schools into withdrawing their child.

I have at least weekly contact [with the SENCo]. She is good at saying the right things in meetings but will not put anything in writing and any interventions or supports agreed with us quickly disappear in practice. She complains of her workload and pressure and insists that many children are worse off than ours. She has twice suggested we home educate and once suggested we move him to another school.

Parents may be informed that their child's needs cannot be accommodated or that there are insufficient funds to support those needs.

None [contact with SENCo] at the first school, denied access. The second school took 11 months just to fill in the initial paperwork, then told me they did not have enough provision for the number of children requiring SEND help.

Alternatively, a parent may 'choose' to move their child to another school once their relationship with the school has deteriorated following, for example, the school's failure to address repeated bullying. Although legal for two decades (The Stationery Office [TSO] 2002), 'managed moves' permit a school to transfer a student to another school where all parties, including parents, are in agreement; however, our own research suggests that a parent or carer can be manipulated into endorsing such a move with relative ease. Consequently, off rolling is difficult to definitively identify and this situation is further complicated by schools' reliance on local authority (LA) advice which is not guaranteed to be based on thorough knowledge of current legislation. It is also the case that Ofsted's (2019b) presupposition that head teachers are engaging in off rolling in order to optimise their school's academic performance data neglects other pressures that are now impacting schools, specifically, funding and staff turnover.

Off rolling and SENCos

No published account of off rolling to date offers any indication of whether, and how, school-based SENCOs are implicated in the informal processes described above. SENCOs do feature in the government response (DfE 2019b) to Timpson (DfE 2019a) and will, in future, be required to promote awareness in their school that poor or disruptive behaviour can be linked to trauma or a diagnosable condition such that rigid adherence to a school behaviour policy is not invariably appropriate. However, should Ofsted's (2019) assumption be correct (that head teachers are gaming the league table system by off rolling or engineering formal exclusions), it is questionable whether this training around SEN-related behaviour will prove to be universally effective in reducing exclusionary practices. Current statutory guidance requires mainstream schools in England to make reasonable adjustments in order to accommodate children and young people with special needs and / or disabilities (SEND) and, yet, informal exclusionary practices are known to occur (DfE 2019a) even though the scale of this problem is impossible to ascertain (Nye and Thompson 2019). Estimates vary from several thousand instances annually to the characterisation of off rolling as 'rife' during a scoping interview pre-dating the data discussed in this think piece.

Historically, the prescribed remit of the English SENCO has shifted towards that of strategic leadership at school level, for example, ensuring an inclusive school ethos (DoH / DfE 2015). This implies that SENCOs who are committed to inclusive education but find themselves in settings where the head teacher and senior leadership team (SLT) engage in exclusionary practices (legal or otherwise) may be placed in a seemingly untenable or invidious position; and this applies whether the SENCO is also a member of the SLT or a relatively junior member of staff. The over-representation of children and young people with SEN in both the formal exclusion data (DfE 2019a) and accounts of off rolling (DfE 2019a) warrants investigation into the attitudes and actions of SENCOs within such scenarios. Hypothetically, if the finding of Savolainen, Malinen and Schwab (2020) of a relationship

between teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusion is applied to SENCoS, then reduced self-efficacy (i.e. capacity to influence senior leader decision-making) risks producing either a change in their attitude towards inclusion or dissatisfaction with the SENCo role. Data that was acquired through scoping interviews with key informants in our own research included accounts of legal proceedings where the school's SENCo is present in order to lend support to their head teacher's account of events which contradicts that of the parent or carer. Below, we report on the perceptions and experiences of parents and carers that responded to an online survey on off rolling following a brief outline of the research project of which it is a part and the novel methodology that this data demanded.

Off rolling research

The authors are currently investigating informal exclusionary practices in a research project which has multiple strands, including analysis of social media discussion amongst education professionals, interviews with head teachers and an online qualitative survey of parents. At its inception, a focus on head teachers was envisaged and, specifically, exploration of the competing discourses and pressures to which they are subject (Done 2019; Done and Knowler 2019). It seemed important to provide head teachers with an opportunity to explain the varied pressures that they must navigate at a time when those suspected of off rolling were being vilified in the public domain for not prioritising an inclusion agenda, for example, *The Times* (2019). It was the reluctance of head teachers to participate in this research and a limited sample size that prompted research into social media contributions from head teachers, teachers and educational professionals, and consultation with advisory services that support the parents and carers of children and young people with SEND to contest school decision-making where contravention of inclusion-related law and statutory

guidance is suspected. Participants in a subsequent online qualitative survey aimed at parents were contacted via these advisory services in England.

The parent survey included a question on the frequency of contact with their school's SENCo and the usefulness of this relationship. The results were concerning and tended to confirm the hypothesis that the self-efficacy of SENCos is conditioned by and, indeed, restricted through the policies pursued by the head teacher and SLT.

[SENCo] was totally useless. Just did as he was told by the head.

She [the SENCo] was trying to do her best, but the head teacher would often overrule her and this hampered her efforts.

SENCo was amazing. We had a good parent to SENCo relationship And we were meeting every week to discuss my son. That all changed when the head of the school got involved.

Of 53 responses, only 6 were positive.

The school's SENCo was brilliant. He clearly understood our son and his needs and was very proactive in trying to provide the right environment for him given their limited resources and funding.

The school SENCo is very helpful and always willing to help and resolve any issue.

A further 6 were positive but qualified by, for example, acknowledgement that “*options [for the SENCo] were limited within the setting*”.

The issue here is not how representative such parental perceptions and experiences were as in positivistic studies; or whether the parents had mobilised particular discursive narratives to increase the likelihood of being ‘heard’ by target audiences (Francis 2015) as in critical discourse analysis. Instead, the objective was to provide parents with an opportunity to break with an ‘established signifying order’ (Kaiser 2017, p.158); and our affirmation of their responses implies a critical research practice that challenges the ‘impression

management' effected through political and policy rhetoric or sanctioned narratives around inclusive education (Ball 2003, p. 221). These narratives or discourses are intended to convey the impression that inclusion has largely been achieved and that SENCOs know what must be done in order for inclusion to be effected and sustained at a localised level. The process at play is one of reification whereby inclusion is taken to be an empirical reality and this includes the presumption that SENCOs are free to fulfil their prescribed remit. However, our parent data was suggestive of a very different process which, in Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) terms, is one of singularisation, denoting the emergence of subjectivities that contradict dominant policy discourse.

In a preliminary thematic data analysis, uselessness, lack of trust due to unfulfilled promises of assistance, and unavailability were recurrent themes relating to SENCOs, accompanied by perceptions that relations with SENCOs are conditioned by head teachers such that SENCOs are caught up in relations of power which inhibit or facilitate inclusive practice.

Constant contact [with SENCO] and false promises made. Constantly calling them out on the lack of help and support for my child.

SENCO no good whatsoever. Promised the earth and did nothing.

SENCO was nice and understanding but was full of broken promises.

A notable feature of the negative parental responses was the level of detail provided by some participants, ensuring a rich data set that was, at times, distressing and chilling to read. Our involvement in university-based NASENCO (National Award in Special Educational Needs Coordination) accreditation means that we are very aware of the political and economic pressures that schools and SENCOs must navigate (Done 2019; Done, Murphy and Knowler 2015), including the continued emphasis on academic performance and the seemingly incontestable political presumption that the standards and inclusion agendas are entirely compatible and easily reconciled (Done and Knowler 2019). We are very familiar with

research narratives in which prospective SENCOs underline their determination to counter any obstacles to inclusive practice in their school settings despite evidence of long-documented ‘concerns’ around policy and its potential implications for teachers (e.g. Avramidis and Norwich 2002). These narratives suggest that initiatives intended to implement the statutory guidance contained in the SEND Code of Practice (DoH / DfE 2015) on parental involvement, or to move practice towards parental ‘engagement’ (Goodall and Montgomery 2014), are widespread. The emotive content of our parent survey responses indicated, however, a disparity between rhetoric and reality that is marked for some parents.

They [the SENCO] were originally enthusiastic and wanting to help and then switched to lies and accusations. I am just as concerned that they deliberately sabotaged my son's access to services and treatment he desperately needed.

In school 1 SENCO talked to us as if we were stupid. She did get the communication and interaction team and educational psychologist involved but didn't support us when the head teacher (who was acting head and didn't know our child) bullied me in a meeting without knowing our child was on the ASD pathway.

Wavelength methodology

As our choice of a qualitative methodological orientation indicates, the aforementioned parent survey was not designed to establish the prevalence of off rolling. We were aware that estimates vary depending on an organisation’s function and political sensitivities; scoping interview data suggested that these practices are ‘rife’ whilst Timpson (DfE 2019a) describes off rolling as an activity that only a small minority of head teachers engage in. The overriding research objective was to gain insights into informal exclusionary practices from a parental perspective. A preliminary thematic analysis of responses relating only to SENCOs produced some startling results. The parents’ comments were poignant,

cynical, angry, evocative, emotive and, overall, conveyed a sense of ‘moral injury’ (Bernstein 2005; Nash et al. 2013) in which unfulfilled promises of support, a powerful sense of vicarious rejection, and betrayals of trust featured prominently.

At primary school [relationship with SENCo] was rubbish. No help at all. Just wanted to get rid of him.

The ‘assumptive worlds’ (Parkes 1988) of these parents had clearly been conditioned, historically, by political rhetoric and a discourse of rights contained in inclusion-related legislation and guidance; and psychological concepts such as cognitive dissonance did not begin to capture the affective or emotional dimension of the exclusionary events that some had subsequently experienced.

Lather (2007) advises researchers to consider the limits of their chosen research methods; that is, ‘the kinds of knowledge production enabled and disabled by them’ (Mazzei and McCoy 2010, p. 503). It was decided that relying solely on the constant comparison method of data analysis (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011) associated with qualitative research risked sanitising our findings or locating them within an instrumental political discourse directed towards professionals in which they are charged with identifying problems and designing suitable remedial actions in order to resolve them or deliver measurable progress. Such a discourse works to sustain a sense of continual improvement and progress that eclipses or, indeed, completely obscures the affective content of data and experiences that run counter to such instrumentalism. However, rather than electing for a ‘post-methodology’ position (Mazzei and McCoy 2010, p. 503), we sought to develop a methodology that permitted the ‘voices’ of selected participants to be amplified and heard. As the term ‘wavelength’ implies, because amplitude and volume are related, some voices will always be louder; hence, political and instrumental professional discourses will be louder than those of isolated parents of children with SEND. Social justice research, in our view,

means resisting the tendency to sanitise data in the service of such discourses and enabling the ‘voices’ of these parents to be heard in a purposeful and affective listening (Gannon, Wyatt, Gale and Davies 2011) which has the potential to change thinking around inclusion.

Like Mason (2006), we reject the framing of the multiple strands of our research as a ‘mixed methods’ strategy since the findings from each strand, in our view, defy any obvious analytical synthesis or, rather, they cannot be readily synthesised without dilution of the affective power of the parent data. Wavelength methodology can be understood as an acknowledgement that experimentation with research methodologies is not only permissible but, in the context of social justice, desirable. It is not a question of rejecting ‘tired epistemologies’ (Lather 2007, p.70 cited in Mazzei and McCoy 2010, p.503) as we would argue that SENCOs do need to be equipped to critically assess published research and, given their prescribed strategic role, to use statistical or numerical data in support of, for example, demands for additional resources. Rather, it is a matter of embracing the values which have informed the choice of research topic, tuning into a wavelength and turning up the volume such that, however briefly, injustices can be recognised and *felt* (Done and Andrews 2019). We have avoided visual metaphors, for example, MacLure’s (2013) concept of data that stands out as shining or glowing in favour of an analogy that assumes a *sentio* (Done and Andrews, 2019), that is, the researcher as a sentient being who feels rather than simply cognitively processes data.

To continue this wavelength analogy, a multi-strand research project will contain numerous wavelengths and, previously, we have ‘tuned in’ to the competing demands made of head teachers in policy discourse (Done and Knowler 2019). As Le Roux (2014) argues, in a somewhat different context, different groups have differing interests at stake in what they, and others, are to know or take as known. Acknowledging the parental suffering, distress, social alienation and anger that can result from a school’s refusal to recognise the right or

legal entitlement of children and young people to participate in mainstream education, and be supported to do so, equally implies that there are likely to be SENCOs who are conflicted when their commitment to inclusion is compromised by their head teacher's decision-making. This suggests the need to create a further strand to our research and a wavelength through which the 'voices' of SENCOs can be heard. In the meantime, the issue is not whether perceived transgressions and betrayals of trust affecting parents and carers derive from unrealistic expectations of schools, or imply a failure of parents and carers to grasp the pressures relating to funding or workload. The issue is whether a methodology can be developed which those interested in social justice, including SENCOs, can mobilise in order to cut through political rhetoric and highlight injustices affecting children and young people with diverse educational needs and their parents, and to create the conditions in which SENCOs can meaningfully support both.

Concluding remarks

The novel wavelength methodology proposed here can be operationalised in different ways; for example, as an overarching qualitative process that permits varied but more familiar methods of data collection and analysis; or, as a departure from conventional qualitative data analysis in which the affective power of data dictates what is shared. Both have a fabulatory component that, in poststructuralist philosophising, implies a re-imagining of future developments in inclusive education and a desire to empower selected groups such that 'moral injury' (Bernstein 2005; Nash et al. 2013) can be pre-empted through a more equitable distribution of power (Murphy and Done 2015). Amplifying the 'voices' of the morally injured is intended to challenge discursive orthodoxies and incentives to exclude in the current educational culture (Done and Knowler 2019).

For Foucault (2007, p.170), to engage in *parrhesia* is to ‘problematise’ and open up possibilities for truth telling when specific forms of knowledge, power and subjectivity have become untenable. As contended earlier, professional interests are likely to inhibit SENCOs from fearless truth telling (Foucault 2001) where off rolling is encountered and they feel powerless to counter the actions of those in positions of relative power. We have hypothesised that, in addition to the primary ‘moral injury’ (Bernstein 2005; Nash et al. 2013) suffered by parents or carers and their children, SENCOs may experience a secondary moral injury arising in such situations from a conflict of values and loyalties; hence, our intention to seek data from SENCOs in a planned study within our multi-strand research into off rolling.

In referring to affect or the affective dimension of off rolling, we are following Deleuze and Guattari (2004) and their rejection of a mind-body dualism (Done and Andrews 2019). We can also note Adorno’s (1998) insistence that the concept of injustice should be replaced with that of suffering as a bodily experience. As Bernstein (2005, p. 304) states, justice in liberal democracies implies impartiality in judgements related to the reconciling of competing interests rather than the elimination suffering. A focus on justice thereby ‘quietly displaces the voice of the excluded’ (p.305). whilst the recognition of social injustice is equally an acknowledgement of suffering.

We conclude by giving parents the last word:

My beautiful little girl has fought every single day of her life to get where she is and lack of funding and / or humanity WILL NOT stop her.

I was constantly angry at how I was largely ignored or challenged on everything I said about [the child]. It was like fighting a battle every day.

I feel like I’ve been banging my head against a brick wall. I meet a teacher or SENCO or GP and know who ‘gets it’ and who doesn’t.

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