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# Isolation booths in schools; A poverty of values and imagination

**Isolation booths in schools are being reported on as part of a recent wider examination of the education system by the media.**

This article is about the practice of removing pupils from their classrooms and placing them in booths for extended periods of time. These booths are called 'isolation booths' and they are usually small three-sided wooden structures in which the pupil sits facing the back wall of the booth.

These 'isolation booths' are the subject of much controversy these days, but their origins lie in much less controversial lineage. Originally they were established centuries ago as carrels in monasteries where the occupant needed some peace from the unfortunate habit of an abomination of monks reading aloud. More recently (this century) university libraries have extensively utilised study booths or carrels which tend to fill up with frantic students around exam time.

In our own context at the TCES Group we have used these study booths extremely effectively in classrooms when we are integrating new pupils with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC)

into a mixed small class group of pupils with ASC and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH). The practice is to provide a pupil with ASC, who will sometimes have significant co-morbidity through high levels of anxiety, with their own 'safe space' study booth within a classroom of about six to eight pupils. This booth allows the pupil with ASC to spend often anxious moments in the busy classroom in their study booth, with a successful integration linked to their increasing participation at the round table in the centre of the classroom. It is a thing of beauty as it works in almost every case and eventually the study booth becomes an unnecessary integration tool.

Imagine my surprise when I heard that this wonderfully inclusive idea was being subsumed and turned into an exclusion intervention. There are polarised views in education about the practice of isolation and the reasoning behind utilising it as a solution to poor behaviour. Some of these views link to the overall issues of austerity, poverty and declining school budgets leading to a poverty of expectation in school with schools struggling to deliver

personalised education and to manage behaviour challenges in special educational needs and disabled (SEND) pupils.

Even in those schools that are trying to get it right (and there are many) and utilise isolation time to support a pupil's reduction in anxiety and modulation of their behaviour, without very clear training and oversight these positive intentions can turn into a punitive regime as experienced by these pupils with SEND.

The government's own behaviour tsar's view leans towards sympathy for the teachers in mainstream schools and academies who have large class sizes and disruptive pupils. These views focus on how these isolation tactics can be effective in tackling disruption in the classroom and their views are taken by many teachers and school leaders as an endorsement of this exclusionary practice.

## The purpose of schools

If the purpose of schools, as espoused by some of the greatest education philosophers over time, is the development of both citizenship and social and moral



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responsibility as well as the academic development of our children, then at no time in modern history in the UK have these values been more at risk. Schools are often the single most consistent element of support for pupils with SEND. These SEND pupils are over represented in the poorest and most vulnerable families.

The schools whose purpose is to serve their communities often find themselves stuck between the proverbial rock and the hard place. Their budgets are being cut each year and often class sizes get bigger as a result. SENDCO staff and support staff ratios are now being squeezed.

We know great SEND senior leaders who have resigned on principle because mainstream school budgets allocated for SEND pupils have been side-tracked to prop up challenging school budgets.

Even the government's flagship programme of academies and free schools are no longer exempt from significant financial hardship. Martin George reported in TES (7 November 2018) that more than 90 academy schools have been assessed as 'material uncertainty to continue as a going concern' due to financial issues. In addition, the number of academies that have closed or are closing due to an 'on-going concern basis' has quadrupled in the last financial year.

Amid a teacher recruitment and retention crisis the likes of which has not been seen before in

modern education, schools have less money each year to entice the best teachers. Year on year the schools are meant to show ever increasing progress and better exam results. Ofsted Inspections are held under a decade-long lust for better results to attempt to replicate the successes of countries over half a world away. This obsession is felt by a generation of teachers and leaders in education to have become the holy-grail, often to the detriment to any pupils who do not make the grade. This toxic mix of increasingly impossible league tables, unsympathetic Inspection regimes and extremely limited funding, means that something has to give.

Some school leaders have become 'Exclusion Leaders', whose primary purpose is to move the problems initially out of class, but quickly out of the school. This is a complete abdication of the school's accountability and responsibility. It also changes nothing except in the delivery of messages to the whole school community, that pupils with issues, whether they be disabilities, home life issues or other complexities, are problems to be removed from the school or placed in segregation.

For a pupil with SEND to suffer a period of isolation without a clear plan for why they are there and how it will help them to return to classroom learning, is troubling enough. However, there are many cases of such pupils being isolated for more than a day, in fact for more than a week, only to return to class and to 'mess up' and be

isolated for another long period. This means other pupils can learn without being disrupted, but teachers and schools seem to be able to implement isolation to mask their own failings to manage the needs of pupils in crisis.

The failure of isolation, as a raw punishment, to have an impact on the pupils' behaviour, only boosts the confidence in the opinion of the SLT and staff teams in many schools that 'they are not right for this school'. What it should be doing, and is doing in a few brilliant places of learning, is triggering questions around provision for pupils with SEND and those in crisis.

There are rules about segregation in maximum security prisons for the most serious adult offenders, but literally no rules for isolation or segregation in schools for the most vulnerable pupils.

These are 'hard to reach' schools rather than 'hard to reach' pupils. The original reason that the majority of teachers came into the profession was 'to make a difference'. Unfortunately this gets lost as does the vital maxim that 'a school is an inclusive place for all pupils not just an exclusive place for some'.

## The Art of the Possible

So what to do? Luckily there is no expensive treatment plan required. What is required however is staff training in understanding the needs of vulnerable children in complex circumstances. This

training is a basic training for all staff in child development, attachment theory, nurture and mental health awareness.

These basic trainings support the staff in understanding and delivering trauma informed practice. But before any of this happens, schools must understand that these complex, wonderful and maddening children are gifted and talented in their own ways. They have struggled with adversity through poverty, home life circumstances or multiple diagnoses. They have withstood things that would knock most adults down. As a result, the following truism applies; "Our deepest wounds surround our greatest gifts." - Ken Page.

What we need to do is change the script and deliver 'School Life Without Labels'. The negative labels of SEMH needs, ASC, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Pathological Demand Avoidance etc that haunt our pupils are just that, labels. Useful up to a point when diagnoses are being determined. Following an Education, Health and Care plan and the related resources, these labels become counter-productive and an excuse for staff to lower expectations. Instead of getting to know 'Johnny' and his unique talents and leadership qualities, however hidden, we can dismiss him and write him off.

Instead, take these children and put them on the student councils and give them one of the multitude of leadership opportunities that

a school can provide, as the very best of our mainstream colleagues do. Give them (and not the smiling and perfectly behaved pupils) a clear leadership role and watch them grow and excel. Yes there will be blips, but everyone enjoys the many reflections of 'hard to reach' pupils saying that the PE teacher or the English teacher changed their lives because they cared and invested in them.

These stories are clichés because they happen so often. No statement is truer than "Children don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Bruno Bettelheim (Child Psychologist).

There are so many cost-effective, creative solutions if the school has a budgetary problem. Give these SEND pupils older pupil mentors. Train up a number of existing staff to be relationship mentors and to provide one to one sessions of one hour per week with the pupils. This is life changing for most pupils and has the ability to completely turn them around. Every child needs at least one altruistic adult who is willing to go the extra mile for them, even if this is against all odds or indeed against the prevailing culture of a school.

In conclusion, if children are disruptive then anticipate this in advance and provide them with touch points with their attachment figures in school.

Take them out of class and address their behaviour but bring them straight back in. Then their



behaviour is addressed but it shows them and the school that they are wanted.

Children's behaviour is always a communication. Train your staff to understand that communication and it will pay dividends. And no, this is not the job of specialists or alternative provision. It is the job of every single teacher and teaching assistant. It is the reason why we all work with these wonderful, maddening children and the sheer joy of being part of a truly inclusive school which supports children and young people whatever their needs cannot be emphasised enough.

**This is the Art of the Possible.**

*Thomas Healey*