

Relational Inclusion Blog 17: Why PRUs Don't Work

This week's blog is more of a think piece than a blog. Back in January, I was invited to present at Andy Burnham's reform board. The topic? Why PRUs don't work. I have run a PRU for the last 5 years. I am not at all criticising anyone who runs PRUs or any of the fantastic staff who work in PRUs. I am commenting on a broken system which could learn so much from what happens in PRUs (and other similar provisions) to make our whole approach to education more inclusive.

I taught in and then led secondary mainstream schools for 23 years. Five years ago, I left mainstream education to run a Pupil Referral Unit. I am now on what you might call the other side of the mirror and what I have found is so mind-blowingly different to what I expected that I thought I'd better share my experience.

Having run a PRU successfully for the last 5 years, it seems odd to claim that PRUs don't work. I suppose I better clarify. There are some really good PRUs; some of the most hard-working and committed staff work in PRUs. For what PRUs are, some of them work the best they can – you might even call them 'outstanding'. However, it is the idea and the concept of a PRU that doesn't and never will work. Let me explain...

When I was in mainstream, I often heard headteachers, senior leaders, teachers and support staff say things like: "This child isn't school ready." "This child doesn't know how to behave." "This child needs punishing." "We can't meet need." Possibly the most common message I heard was: "This child will be better off if we permanently exclude them. We are actually doing this for their own good. They will do better in a PRU."

To some extent this is the school system that we work in. But have you really considered what this means? As Lori Desautels says:

While framed in "positive language" [schools] remain based on this underlying principle: Do as you are told or we will need to punish you. If that continues not to work, we will banish you.

And once a school has washed their hands of a child – and this is what we do, even we don't want to admit it, they are out of sight and out of mind. Let me give you an example. Of all the children who have been permanently excluded in the schools that you have worked in – do you know where they are now? Do you know how many GCSEs they got? Or did you basically forget about them?

There also seems to be a common misconception that '*one child can spoil a school*', as though somehow other children can 'catch' their behaviour. This is a common myth in mainstream education and a myth that needs putting to bed.

If a school's culture is right and the climate is right, then when a child dysregulates, a supportive network wraps itself around that child creating a network of co-regulation. School becomes a safe place where children are supported and not punished when things go wrong. In fact, it is more likely that when a school's culture isn't one of *felt safety* that behaviours can escalate. This isn't because the children are 'catching' each other's poor behaviour but is in fact because the environment is triggering their nervous systems.

(Incidentally it is well worth looking up Philip Zimbardo's Stamford Prison Experiment and reading a bit about the nervous system and fight and flight)

Another common misconception is that punitive consequences (in other words tariffed behaviour systems) *improve* behaviour. If this were true, why are we in the midst of a behaviour crisis? Our current education system is based on a Victorian model and has been running for about 144 years. If this kind of punitive approach really works, why haven't we cracked behaviour yet? Why are exclusions and suspensions at their highest rate on record? If you want to test this - go and visit a detention hall. The same students sit there night after night after night.

The reality is:

Many current school discipline procedures are forms of punishment that work best with the students who need them the least. With our most difficult students, the current discipline models don't change their behaviour, often escalating the challenges and problems by unintentionally reactivating those students' stress response systems. (Lori Desautels)

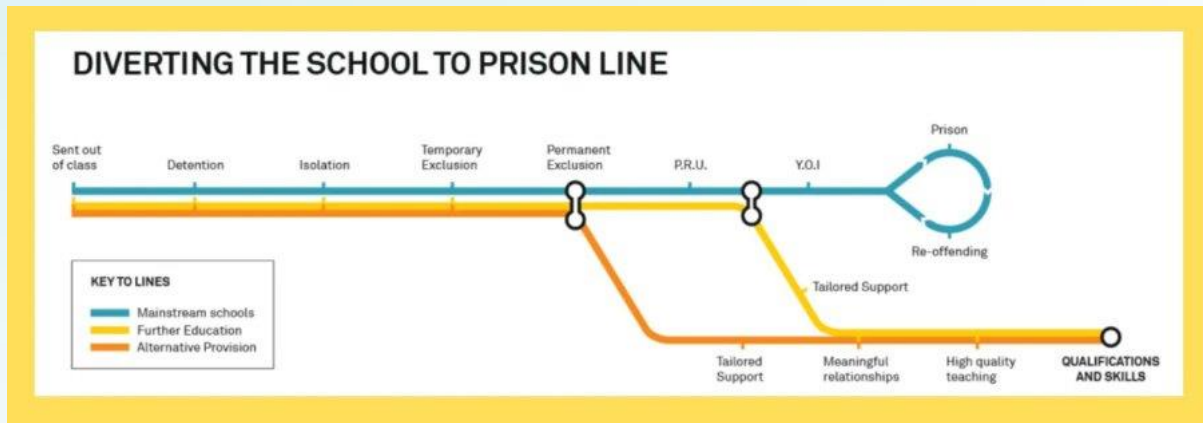
So what really happens to children once they have been permanently excluded? Here are some statistics:

- 1% of PRU students get 5 GCSEs
- 4% of pupils in AP passed English and Maths at GCSE
- Around one in five (22%) of children that had ever been permanently excluded were also cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence

It might be useful to be clear on exactly which children, statistically, make up the majority of those who are permanently excluded. Permanently excluded children are often the most vulnerable children in our schools. They are:

- twice as likely to be in the care of the state
- four times more likely to have grown up in poverty
- five times more likely to be on Free School Meals
- five times more likely to have a special educational need
- ten times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems

After permanently excluded children leave PRUs and AP, the picture grows still more bleak. There is a clear link between exclusion and criminality, and this is often referred to as the 'PRU to Prison Pipeline':



- The Institute of Public Policy in 2017 estimated that out of the 85,975 people in UK prisons, 54,164 (62%) were excluded when at school
- Disengagement with school and exclusions are strong indicators for those at risk of being involved in youth violence.
- Research from the Ministry of Justice shows that young people who have been excluded from school are more likely to reoffend. Specifically, 59% of those who had been excluded reoffended within a year, compared to 35% of those who had not been excluded.
- **Committing crime may be seen as the easier thing to do in a system that is actively working against your success.**

It might just be me, but this all seems a far cry from a place where our most vulnerable children are 'better off'. So why don't PRUs and AP work? Here are 5 key reasons why the idea of an establishment such as a PRU creates more problems than it solves:

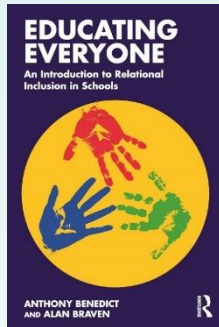
1. **Geography** – Children usually attend a school which is within a reasonable travelling distance. In Manchester you must live within roughly a five mile radius of your secondary school to even be considered for a place. Generally there is only one PRU in most boroughs in the North West and these are not even located centrally. This means that permanently excluded children may be expected to travel half way across the city just to attend. Children who are permanently excluded often have low attendance in their parent schools so are really going to struggle to get to PRU which is miles a way and for which there is no direct means of transport.

2. **Stigmatization and Isolation:** Being permanently excluded from their school further separates children from their peers. These children are already often experiencing attachment issues and this can be worsened by permanent exclusion. Attending PRUs can stigmatize students, making them feel isolated from their peers in mainstream education. This can reinforce negative self-perceptions and contribute to a cycle of disengagement from education.
3. **Quality of Education:** PRUs often face challenges in providing the same quality of education as mainstream schools. Limited resources, fewer extracurricular activities, and less diverse educational opportunities can disadvantage students in PRUs. A PRU simply cannot offer the range of subjects available to mainstream education. Equally PRUs are not initially staffed by highly trained specialists equipped to support the needs of the children who arrive. They are the same teachers, with the same qualifications as the staff in mainstream schools.
4. **Reintegration Challenges:** Transitioning back to mainstream schools from PRUs can be difficult for students. They may struggle to reintegrate socially and academically, leading to further exclusions and educational instability, this can also retraumatise students and further exasperate any attachment issues they may have. In 2022 the government produced a document highlighting that it was important to 'prevent retraumatisation'.
5. **Resource Allocation:** PRUs can be expensive to run, and the funds allocated to them might be better spent on providing additional support within mainstream schools. There is a growing tendency for schools to 'pass the buck' claiming that some children 'are not school ready'. It seems we have totally forgotten the 'every child matters' agenda. If every child was everyone's responsibility, we may think about this differently. Investing in early intervention programs, special education resources, and training for mainstream teachers might prevent exclusions in the first place.

It is also important for schools and their staff not to hide behind a deficit narrative. Social disadvantage is certainly not an excuse for lower expectations and outcomes. It is our job as school leaders, teachers and support staff to create the right conditions for all children to thrive. We create the climate in our schools and our classrooms. After all *'If you've told a child and they still don't understand, it is not them who is the slow learner.'* (Walter Barbee)

Exclusion isn't a behaviour solution; it's a relational rupture. It is time to rethink what inclusion means. Every child is entitled to an education. If the system can't do this, then maybe it's time we tried to change the system instead of expecting children to fit into a model isn't fit for purpose and then punishing them when they can't.

If you are interested in how this can be achieved, please read my book- Educating Everyone: An introduction to Relational Inclusion for schools. It is available pretty much everywhere that sells books or you can get it here:



You can subscribe to my weekly blog here:

https://open.substack.com/pub/anthonybenedict/p/relational-inclusion-blog-15?r=5ki35n&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=true

We are partnering with the Difference and ARC to put on a North West Inclusion event where we will discuss all things Relational Inclusion and more. This will take place on Friday June 27th and tickets are limited so grab one now!

[Inclusion Northwest Tickets, Fri 27 Jun 2025 at 09:00 | Eventbrite](#)

Thanks for reading

Anthony Benedict

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