

Relational Inclusion blog #24: To include or to just not exclude - that is the question.
But is internal AP the answer?

Recently the children's commissioner announced the need to register, regulate and raise standards - she was of course talking about unregistered alternative provision (AP). But she should be equally concerned about the rise in internal APs.

If all our school leaders were asked to raise their virtual hands to signal that their school wasn't inclusive, there would be a murmur of disbelief, or even horror, at such a suggestion. And not a hand would stir. But are our schools truly inclusive or to many does inclusion simply mean not exclusion? Is the growing trend for internal AP simply an extension of so-called *respect* or *reflection* or *reset* rooms? How are children even expected to reflect if they aren't taught the neuroscience which sits behind their emotional responses? In reality, these are little more than isolation rooms where the *naughty kids* who don't *fit in* or won't *follow rules* are rounded up, grouped together and, under the excuse of a *deficit narrative*, given a watered-down curriculum. These are sometimes supported by low expectations, where children are moved out of sight (and mind) so they don't *spoil* the other children's learning and teachers can get on with their jobs and *teach the children who want to learn*.

Data from Edurio's Pupil Experience Survey suggests our schools may not be as inclusive as they think. It demonstrates that 'Pupil Interest in learning has dropped significantly from 42% in 2020/21 to 28% in 2023/24'.

Data from this research shows that levels of enjoyment, trust, agency and safety drop dramatically among year 7 pupils and don't fully recover:

- Pupils' average school enjoyment score drops from around 6.0 in year 6 to 3.8 in year 7, then falls further to 3.2 in year 8.
- Headline engagement — which includes willingness to recommend and return to the school — follows the same downward trend and never fully recovers in secondary years.

The more granular data shows that disadvantaged pupils and girls are hit hardest:

- Pupils eligible for Free School Meals report lower levels of trust, enjoyment and belonging — with the gap widening through secondary.
- Girls are more likely to feel unsafe or worried, particularly in years 7–9, despite showing higher academic drive than boys.

And falling engagement predicts absenteeism:

- Secondary pupils in the top 25% of engagement scores in November 2024 are 10 percentage points less likely to be persistently absent than those in the bottom 25%
- Less engaged pupils are also more likely to arrive late to school.

The research found that **the quality of teacher-pupil relationships** is the strongest predictor of engagement scores. The evidence is clear:

“Research has suggested that the quality of pupil-teacher relationships is related to the development of young people’s socio-emotional skills and the amount of knowledge they absorb in the classroom (Coristine, 2021). Positive teacher-pupil relationships foster a supportive and nurturing learning environment where pupils feel valued and understood (Emslander et al., 2024). When pupil-teacher relationships are stronger, pupils are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards school and learning (Huan et al., 2010). If students report strong, positive relationships with their teachers, it suggests that the school’s efforts to promote a respectful and collaborative classroom environment are successful. Conversely, if pupils’ express dissatisfaction with these relationships, it may indicate a need for professional development or changes in pupil management strategies to improve teacher-pupil interactions.” (Jerrim, 2025, Mind the Engagement Gap: A National Study of Pupil Engagement in England’s Schools).

Finally, Edurio’s [Pupil Happiness at School](#) report talks about building belonging through deep relationships. It is a series of case studies from our brilliant sector on what trusts are doing to support pupil happiness and belonging.

I’m certain there are examples of great practice, settings where the curriculum is properly tailored to meet need, support is intense and re-integration is the aim.

But I do wonder if internal AP being used as a way of masking the rising numbers of suspensions and exclusions (and falling attendance) rather than addressing the actual problems that lie behind the behaviour? Is it just a way of shifting the blame back onto the kids, reinforcing the age-old argument that they’re not school ready and they are failing at school? Shouldn’t we be addressing the cause not the symptoms? Isn’t it time we shifted the narrative? Is the school system’s apparent obsession with *compliance* actually helping anyone? Many school leaders argue that children aren’t *school ready*. Maybe we need to look at this through a different lens - are schools ready for their changing population? How can they better meet the needs of the children they serve? Are they ready to adjust and adapt to our changing world in order to create better futures for all? Isn’t it time that our creaking education and behaviour systems had a shake up?

What if *Alternative Provision* really was a recognised and accepted alternative - one where children didn’t have to sit down and shut up. One where movement breaks and fresh air was positively encouraged. Where sitting on the floor or not looking someone in the eye was recognised as accepted ways of learning and children weren’t divided and labelled under headings such as neuro-typical and neuro-diverse but were taught in a way that recognised and understood neuroscience. I was in a meeting last week and a colleague joked that the only people who still wear ties are teachers – might it be time to even revisit what school uniform looks like? Are ties really necessary? Does having your top button fastened make you a better student?

What if we recognised that discipline didn’t mean red lines and zero tolerance but represented its real meaning. As Dan Siegal says:

Too often we forget that discipline really means to teach, not to punish. A disciple is a student, not a recipient of behavioural consequences.

- Dr. Dan Siegel, The Whole-Brain Child

I am not being a hippy or a tree hugger - though there is nothing wrong with either of those things. I am not making excuses for poor behaviour. What I am doing is recognising that the school system is broken; that it is largely based on an old fashioned Victorian factory model; that rows and whistles and bells are outdated and belong firmly in the past along with corporal punishment (though I do fear some would bring back caning and the dunce hat at – well, the drop of a hat).

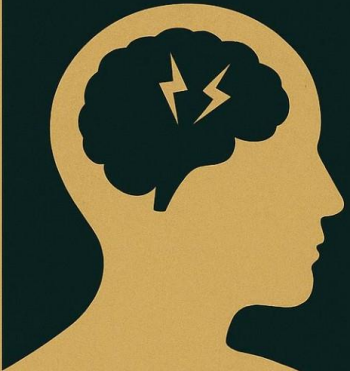
Even the name - internal AP - sounds like a punishment for naughty children - send them away, put them in the hole.

AP doesn't need to be like this. It should be an entitlement for every child to be able to thrive and survive. This shouldn't mean a lowering of standards and expectations. Imagine a school where a hair salon sits next to the science lab; a bike repair room is next to the maths classroom; the outside grass areas house rescued or rehomed rabbits and chickens and even goats. Where forest schools are an expected and accepted part of all children's curriculums; Where animal care is considered an equal science; Where the curriculum places equal focus and value on the EEF core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. A real emotional curriculum which has on an equal footing with the traditionally more *academic subjects* and also runs alongside Andy Burnhams technical qualifications through something like the MBAC.

Doesn't that sound like a true alternative? Doesn't that sound like an environment all of our children should be entitled to? If our PRUs and Special schools can do this with some of our most vulnerable children who are often the most difficult to reach - why aren't our schools following suit? It sounds more of a mainstream idea to me. Let's stop making excuses and create a truly child centred and inclusive education system.

**IT'S NOT DEFIANCE—
IT'S DEFENSE**

**UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA RESPONSES
IN EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS**



A student who avoids eye contact is labeled "disrespectful."
An employee who hesitates to speak up is seen as "disengaged."
A patient who asks many questions is considered "difficult."

**LET'S SHIFT
THE NARRATIVE:**

From "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"
From judgment to curiosity.
From authority to presence.

**DESIGN FOR THE NERVOUS
SYSTEM—NOT JUST THE BEHAVIOR**

Thanks for reading

Anthony Benedict

CEO Ambition Community Trust