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Call for evidence APPG: School Exclusions & Alternative Provision

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Call for Evidence – APPG: school exclusions and alternative provision

Submitted on 01/04/21

In this submission, we aim to highlight some of the tensions associated with the conceptualisation and practical organisation of Alternative Provision (AP). While we agree that a flexible continuum of provision is essential so that ALL learners can receive high quality educational experiences, we want to argue here that it is essential that the APPG take account of the danger of ‘tinkering around the edges’ of AP, potentially leaving in place an approach that perpetuates inequalities, rather than advocating for the change required to ensure that AP is fully complimentary. The most obvious danger is that, without critical thinking and reflection on the damaging aspects of AP, this review will merely reproduce a ‘shadow’ system that mimics the worst aspects of mainstream approaches to supporting marginalised and traumatised children and young people. As such, our submission will not provide the answers expected; rather, and instead, we question the motivations behind the use of AP and raise important questions that do not yet appear to have been considered by the questions asked here about ‘quality’ and ‘measurement’. We will not contribute to a perpetuation of the current broken system.

We argue that the proposed Alternative Provision (AP) framework has a segregationist and deficit premise. It is one that has significantly steered away from the original [White Paper](#) and its short-stay schools agenda. A policy shift from local authority PRUs to MATS’ and Free schools’ own AP will not substantively change the underpinning discriminatory and subjugatory ideology that is enacted within current arrangements. AP settings are educational spaces that are not equivalent in educational value to the mainstream, despite the fact that they cost substantially more. In addition, they contribute to the reproduction of the *educational other* – marginalised, criminalised, disproportionately racialised and [stigmatised](#). For as long as that is the case, AP will continue to be [sin bins](#), spaces that reproduce unequal and deeply unjust outcomes for racialised, disabled, poor and male children. Grouping and segregating so-called ‘troubled youth’ together in AP will continue to render already vulnerable groups even more vulnerable. While further entrenching and normalising the discriminatory but highly lucrative ‘out of sight, out of mind’ education policy and practice solutions in which some children will be locked into perpetual cycles of disadvantage and inequality. A consideration of AP ‘quality’ therefore should not help establish how these provisions can perform their current role (that of an inferior context for excluded children) more effectively, but how this role can be rendered obsolete and transformed into an equitable and inclusive opportunity for learners. We think that this requires a philosophical, practical and fiscal shift in considering the purposes of AP. This APPG on Exclusion and AP appears to take the position that AP is

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necessary in order to 'fix' children – the 'repair and return' narrative explored in [Pennacchia and Thomson's](#) research. We think this results in a failure to see beyond neoliberal concepts of quality and outcomes, as reflected in the ever-growing trend to marketise AP through the expansion of academies.

Achieving goals in the pursuit of educational attainment and experiencing enjoyment in learning contexts are not necessarily compatible processes in the current education system. The rhetoric of 'social justice' and 'diversity' in education merely serves to highlight the ever-widening gaps in outcomes for learners who experience exclusions. For Black children and young people, the '[veneer of diversity](#)' is even more damaging as AP is often a place that is imagined as a place of sanctuary and a 'fresh start'. In some cases, children and young people who have been marginalised, pathologised and assessed in terms of their failure are expected to miraculously change by virtue of a change of environment.

We strongly advocate the need for a better understanding of the mechanisms of exclusion that mean AP settings tend to work with learners who have been failed by mainstream schools. Here, we want to highlight the paradox of learners being granted high-quality provision only after they have been excluded; the idea that learners need 'fixing' before they can be 'returned' to the mainstream is something that we also want to challenge. If AP is to be a high-quality alternative to mainstream settings, then the marketisation of education provision must similarly be faced and addressed. Children and young people are not commodities who can be quickly moved around settings and, while we are not opposed to the principle of AP as part of a continuum of high-quality provision that ALL learners can access, we assert that issues of disproportionality should be examined, as should the training and support of the AP workforce, and equity in terms of access of qualifications and employability. Without these considerations, AP is simply the '[dark side of inclusion](#)' where we filter out those pupils who do not fit (off-rolling is an obvious manifestation of this logic). AP will thus remain an important link within the [school-to-prison pipeline](#). The serious threat of a 'two-tier system' persists, challenging those who seek to justify the use of a separate track of alternative approaches to mainstream education.

The thinking required to interrogate what constitutes 'quality' in the context of AP is complex, not least when addressing the dangers of AP's development as a form of 'shadow provision'. A system that centres children's rights and entitlements to high-quality provision is currently incompatible with a high-stakes examination of the tendency to use AP as a place that learners who do not 'fit' attend. In our experience, there is rarely choice

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or autonomy in the decision by young people to attend AP and most learners find themselves in AP because of an exclusion or an 'off rolling'/illegal exclusion incident. Whether they realise this or not at the time, is a moot point. It is reasonable to assume that a focus on 'quality' implies an intentional and in-depth analysis of aspects of provision that helps to encourage the development of inclusive environments, except that in the current inspection and testing regimes, it is reasonable to have some suspicion in relation to the question of 'quality for whom?' An analysis of quality suggests a dual but often competing focus on the management and culture of provision, and we would argue that doing 'quality' work in education not only involves looking at narrow assessment measures but also the philosophical, ethical and relation dimensions of educational provision. We are not aware of any such approach in current AP settings, and therefore any assessment of quality would require a radical reimagining of the purposes and aims of AP, as part of a continuum of provision for all learners. [Research evidence](#) points to the importance of strong partnerships between education placements, building on the work AP does around positive relationships and more appropriate learning environments, and the need for further work on how to support those deemed to be 'difficult' without relying on a revolving door of placements leading eventually to complete exclusion from education.

International comparisons regarding what 'works' in supporting alternative places and spaces for learning yield some interesting considerations. In Germany, for example, there is a different philosophical and practical approach to 'alternative provision' in that no such schools physically exist. Rather, German primary and secondary schools are split between public schools and private or alternative schools (known as Ersatzschulen). The problem in England, when compared to the German context, is the fundamental doublespeak used in the attempt to define AP as something that is equivalent to mainstream settings. Ersatzschulen are all based upon the right to establish alternatives to public schools, which is enshrined in the German constitution (Grundgesetz – 'Basic Law'). All private schools that offer German qualifications, however, must receive approval from regional state authorities, who assess whether the school measures up to public-sector schools in terms of their educational aims, facilities and staff. Furthermore, Ersatzschulen cannot be deemed to be encouraging the segregation of pupils according to their socioeconomic backgrounds. For this reason, these schools receive fairly generous state subsidies and tend to charge much lower tuition fees than in other countries in western Europe. There is no sense, in this example, that Ersatzschulen are second-class provision, but rather that educational rights are protected and provision appropriately resourced. This highlights the importance of the quality of any educational offer being judged by what this offer delivers in terms of social justice for all learners. If education is, at the very least, understood as a universal social good, paid for by tax-

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payers money, then the return on investment of Alternative Provision for society simply does not stack up. The average cost per pupil stands at around [£19,000 per year](#) and [the educational outcomes in AP are extremely poor](#), with 96% failing to achieve the necessary GCSE grades required to provide choices and fair life chances. Further, nearly two in three AP students will become involved in the criminal justice system; this comes at an estimated cost of [£2.1 billion](#) for each excluded cohort over their lifetime.

Several of our members have worked in AP as teachers – some for over a decade. These colleagues can attest to the fact that, in spite of these settings' good intentions and their staff's best efforts and dedication, AP are – and have historically always been – structurally incapable of delivering social justice, equity and inclusive education for all. In order to be enrolled in AP, children have to be identified as failing, unteachable, vulnerable, at risk of exclusion or otherwise not coping within mainstream education. This lived experience mirrors much of the available data that demonstrates that many students who attend AP have [undiagnosed learning needs or disabilities, which should have been supported by their mainstream schools](#). Most students in AP are [male](#) (although girls' numbers are rising); on (or eligible for) Free School Meals; and [disproportionately Black Caribbean, Irish traveller heritage and Gypsy Roma heritage](#). While many AP settings do have a wide range of expertise, smaller class sizes and some flexibility in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, many APs appear to be a slightly modified version of mainstream provision, which begs the question of how 'alternative' they actually are? To draw on [Gus John](#), what will be the 'cost' to learners if the AP sector is further 'professionalised' and 'standardised'? We suggest that complementary schools should be constructed as a genuine alternative that still provide quality curricula and facilitate access to higher education. They would provide recognition that a one-size-fits-all model further marginalises those students who already face significant social and economic difficulties. They would seriously challenge the idea that Alternative Provision is often seen as a forgotten part of the system, sidelined and stigmatised as somewhere the 'worst behaved' go.

Relationships need to be at the heart of the education process to ensure that marginalised students feel connected to school. However, in the words of [Jessica Perera](#), we are wary of the obvious attempts to 'marketize the marginalised'. It is no secret that school exclusion disproportionately impacts certain groups of children – namely, those with special educational needs, those claiming free school meals and children racialised as Black Caribbean, Gypsy, Roma or Traveller. Encouraging the use of AP to cater for the educational needs of these children sends alarm bells ringing and raises fears regarding ['segroconomics'](#). The disproportionate exclusion of these children should not be viewed as an opportunity for profit; doing so, only seeks to further marginalise them from society at

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large and to serve the view that they are unworthy of a full education in mainstream schools.

“Discriminatory provision of education to different classes or ethnic or other groups within a society is... the single most powerful tool for subjugating and marginalising those who are denied any, or inferior education” ([Bernard Coard, 2004](#))

Answers to all other q’s: “For the reasons stated in our response above, we are unable to engage with this question as we object to its underlying ideology and assumptions”