

It's everyone's job to make alternative provision work

Amid a spike in knife crime that some have blamed on pupil referral units, the sector is under greater scrutiny than ever before. But instead of throwing up roadblocks, we must change policies and perceptions to better support young people, argues **Alex Yates**

Alternative provision has never been under the spotlight as much as it has in the past few months. The rise in knife crime and political assertions that time spent in AP – or, more specifically, pupil referral units (PRUs) – is to blame have prompted scrutiny of this sector on a scale not previously seen.

What this period has highlighted is that AP is much misunderstood, not just by the general public but by many in education, too.

The government's definition of AP is clear: it provides education for children who can't go to a mainstream school. That includes an array of services, from special schools to hospital schools to PRUs. And around 40,000 pupils are now taught in AP.

But beyond this, what do we need to know about this part of the education system?

The isolated sector

While education secretary Damian Hinds seems to want AP to be "an integral part of the education system", he also recognises that "in practice...the AP sector often finds itself on the periphery of the education system" (1). The Commons Education Select Committee, meanwhile, has voiced

real concern at "an inexplicable lack of central accountability and direction" (2).

Certainly, our experience is that isolation is a reality we have to face in this sector of the education system. The combination of separate funding streams and only locally generated accountability measures often leaves us feeling as though our school is an island within the provision.

We desperately need a new national vision for a sector that is likely to be required to maintain an inclusive educational landscape in the UK over the next decade.

Pupils and parents say they lack control

In terms of the national picture, it seems the vast majority of referrals, although clearly not all, come from mainstream secondary schools (about 85 per cent). And after referral, pupils are generally unlikely to return to those settings. In Year 11, only 10 per cent return to mainstream provision, according to the research report *Alternative Provision Market Analysis*, by the Isos Partnership on behalf of the Department for Education (3).

Pupils and parents seem to have little say in this process. The select committee observed: "We were told that it is often not in the hands of the pupil or parent when decisions are made about where a pupil attends alternative provision." And that "some schools leave pupils to languish and struggle for too long".



I would agree. Among the varied work of our special school, we run an oversubscribed GCSE programme for young people who have experienced significant physical or mental health challenges that mean they are unable to access a mainstream setting. Wherever referrals come from – through paediatric consultants, heads of year or local authority medical needs officers – parents consistently report to us that

their journey into special provision has been convoluted and lengthy.

Is referral delayed because it adds up to an admission of defeat, a rejection of the young person in some way ("anti-inclusion"), or evidence of some sort of shortfall in the curriculum offer? On the pupils' and families' side, there has to be an acceptance of the very difficult fact that mainstream provision has, in some significant way,

not worked. And, therefore, another difficult question is raised: who is to blame?

Inequity of esteem

There can certainly be a strong emotional reaction to being placed outside mainstream. In its report for the DfE, *Investigative Research into Alternative Provision*, IFF Research posits the key question: "Is AP used proactively or as a last resort?"

Whether it's a last resort or not, the DfE openly admits: "We recognise that, for some children and parents, a referral to AP does not initially represent a positive choice." (4)

At our school, we certainly find that a good deal of time is taken, in the weeks following a pupil's initial entry, on rebuilding confidence and self-belief. Admission is an active choice for very few here. While we try to respond reflexively and creatively to

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References

- 1 Department for Education (2018) *Creating Opportunity for All: our vision for alternative provision* bit.ly/CreatingOp
- 2 Commons Education Select Committee (2018) *Forgotten Children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions, fifth report of session 2017-19* bit.ly/ForgottenChildrenReport
- 3 Bryant, B, Parish, N, Swords, B et al (2018) *Alternative Provision Market Analysis* (Isos Partnership) bit.ly/APMarketAnalysis
- 4 Department for Education (2018) *Government Response to the Education Select Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2017-19 on Alternative Provision*, bit.ly/ResponsetoSelect
- 5 IFF Research, with Mills, M and Thomson, P (2018) *Investigative Research into Alternative Provision*, bit.ly/APIInvestigativeResearch

this challenge (giving pupils greater ownership over and an active voice in “their” provision), there are limits. Sadly, these are often visible to all in terms of limited space and resourcing.

Recruitment is tough and attainment is a challenge

We are a community school based in North London, and referrals to our AP programme tend to be fairly local – we are here, as AP is intended to be, to meet local need. I am able to recruit staff from a relatively large pool in North London and vary their experience across the wider work of the special school.

This is not the case across the country. Yet, more than any other sector of education, AP needs good teachers. The select committee report records Professor David Berridge asking: “How we can create a system that incentivises the best teachers to go to the areas where they are needed?”

With AP’s reputation as a poor cousin of mainstream, this can lead to something of a credibility gap, where AP is clearly not seen as a prospective career choice for the most talented teachers.

In a report from March last year, *Creating Opportunity for All: our vision for alternative provision*, the DfE protests that it is now starting to look at measures to recruit and retain appropriate talent: “We have already changed the initial teacher training requirements to allow AP academies, free schools and PRUs to train new teachers,

and we now want to ensure that staff within AP providers can access other opportunities for CPD.”

The select committee suggests some interesting measures that may enhance AP’s status: all mainstream schools should be “buddied” with an AP school (3). The DfE also says it want ways of measuring (and celebrating) achievements within AP.

Whether this will include data beyond the quantitative for a cohort who may have faced a range of challenges and barriers to learning is unclear. Based purely on attainment data, some of the doubts that children and their families – as well as referrers – appear to have about AP seem well-placed.

The *Creating Opportunity for All* report states that children who attend AP at key stage 4 do not achieve the same level of educational attainment as their peers in mainstream schools. National data shows that 4.5 per cent of children who attended AP achieved 9-4 passes in English and maths at GCSE, compared with 65.1 per cent in state-funded mainstream schools and 1 per cent in state-funded special schools.

AP needs to redefine (or even “rebrand”) itself. This requires being given real freedom to cater for children who may struggle to engage with mainstream provision.

Capacity must be increased

The final issue is capacity. The IFF Research report outlines the lack of any convincing national overview: only now

is the DfE starting to look at “how AP in local areas is organised” (5), while acknowledging the challenge. Unlike traditional markets, where growth is a positive characteristic, the report says the AP market is one where there is a need to ensure demand is carefully controlled and aligned to the supply of local provision.

In our school, we are especially conscious of the rise in child and adolescent mental health services admissions, and that AP will surely, somehow, have to keep up with an emerging adolescent mental health need.

However, joint commissioning between health and education providers is still rare and, in reality, when the NHS opens new units or provisions to meet need, there is often very limited consultation on educational provision.

That said, we have just received news that we have been successful in a bid to open new local provision in September – a rare but incredibly positive example of so-called “joint commissioning” at council level. We are thankful for their support.

So, the issues facing AP are multiple. Teachers in this sector do an incredible job despite all these challenges, but we need help from a policy perspective, and in changing the perception of schools and pupils. It is in all our interests to make AP work, so all of us need to take an active role in ensuring that happens. ●

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