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Unruly children are simply being written off

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Atrocious, unregulated schools have become a dumping ground for problematic pupils
— and society will pay the price





It is just after 9am and children are arriving at a nondescript low-rise building in a residential West Midlands street. The block looks like a doctor's surgery but it is in fact an unregistered school that appears to be operating illegally. I have joined the Ofsted investigations team on an unannounced visit and there are chaotic scenes when the two inspectors knock on the door and demand entry. Children troop between rooms, their hands covered in paint while a staff member follows behind them wiping the door handles and mopping up drips. A boy who looks about eight turns to a girl and shouts at her: "Shut up you whore!"

The inspectors have been tipped off about this site by a concerned neighbour, who wrote complaining about the "abusive and offensive" language being used at the school and the "shouting and screaming" that could be heard through the open windows. The letter said that there appeared to be "no control" at all in the classroom and children had been seen "escaping" into the street.

The school is now the subject of an investigation by Ofsted, which could lead to criminal charges. What is extraordinary is that it is run by the local authority, either oblivious to or deliberately ignoring the legal duty to register any setting providing a full-time education to more than five children. These are primary school pupils who have been excluded from mainstream education and the state is already giving up on them.

It is a story that is being repeated all over the country with shocking consequences for law and order as well as social cohesion. Since 2016 Ofsted has investigated more than 500 suspected illegal schools and estimates that about 6,000 children are being educated in unregistered settings. Many of these establishments are filthy and dangerous: inspectors have found open sewers and rat droppings in classrooms, broken glass and water dripping on electrical cables. Teachers are often untrained, and heads will go to extreme lengths to cover up what they are doing: sometimes as inspectors go through the front door a staff member will lead the children out of a door at the back.

About a fifth of the unregistered schools uncovered by Ofsted are defined as places of religious instruction. These include the madrassas suspected of fuelling extremism that have received some attention. But the biggest number of these off-the-book institutions — 28 per cent of the total — are offering alternative provision (AP) for pupils who have been expelled from mainstream schools. Victor Shafiee, Ofsted's

deputy director who runs the unregistered schools task force, describes the AP sector as a “Wild West” with too many children who need highly specialised attention being taught in completely unregulated settings. “We don’t even know if they’re safe, let alone if they’re getting a good education,” he told me. “We can’t as a society just park them and forget about them or we will pay the price in the end. These are often the most vulnerable children, they should be protected not abandoned.”

The potentially illegal unregistered AP schools are only the tip of the iceberg. Many institutions are exploiting loopholes in the law to operate substandard regimes with no risk of prosecution. When Ofsted conducted a survey in 2011 it found that only 17 of the 61 AP providers it visited were subject to any kind of regulation or inspection regime.

Schools offering less than 18 hours of education a week do not have to register and some are deliberately trying to avoid scrutiny by teaching pupils for only 17 hours and 50 minutes. Others send children from one setting to another so they only do a few hours in each place, so each place can stay below the limit. Pupils who desperately need stability and structure in their lives are left to roam the streets for hours on end with nobody managing their timetable or fully responsible for their wellbeing.

The number of exclusions rose last year and 42 children are now being removed from mainstream education every day. It seems so obvious that this should be seen as a trigger for these difficult and often damaged young people to get intensive support but instead they are being dumped in the educational equivalent of “sin bins”. Those in alternative provision are half as likely to have qualified teachers as those in mainstream schools and only 1 per cent get the five GCSEs they need to find basic employment.

Instead of being a ladder of opportunity, the education system has become a conveyor belt to crime. Pupil referral units are a recruiting ground for gangs and excluded students are over 200 times more likely to have been involved in a knife-carrying offence. The “twilight hours” that require only a few hours’ attendance a day leave teenagers with plenty of time for county-line drug trafficking.

Boris Johnson has promised an extra 20,000 police officers and an increase in stop and search to tackle the epidemic of street violence, but if he really wants to deal with knife crime he must also tackle the root cause by improving the education given to excluded children. The numbers are tiny — only 0.1 per cent of all pupils are permanently

expelled — so a relatively small amount of money would have a huge impact. The long-term savings to the taxpayer would be enormous if, instead of ending up in jail, these youngsters got good jobs.

There are amazing success stories that show it can be done. The Boxing Academy in Hackney encourages often violent excluded pupils to channel their aggression into fighting in the ring, combining small classes with discipline and high expectations. Its GCSE results this year were more than five times better than the national average and all the candidates are going on to college. Next week a group of high-flying teachers will start working in pupil referral units as part of a new programme designed to boost the quality of alternative provision. They have been recruited by a charity called The Difference which aims to apply the lessons of Teach First, the organisation that sends graduates into inner-city classrooms, to schools for excluded pupils.

The government should back this excellent initiative and start to break down the barriers between mainstream education and alternative provision. All excluded pupils should have a proper education with qualified teachers, a full timetable and a broad curriculum. All schools should be regulated and inspected by Ofsted, including alternative providers, regardless of the hours they teach. No child should be written off or society will suffer the consequences.