

Want to help pupils at risk of exclusion? Do less



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Experts say teachers must learn their limitations and get help

Teachers are used to being asked to do more for pupils at risk of exclusion. So it may come as a welcome surprise that one expert has suggested that doing less might be the best way for staff to help.

University of Edinburgh academic Gillean McCluskey said that teachers were uniquely placed to assist children and young people, but the lack of clear professional boundaries made it difficult for well-meaning staff to say no.

Sometimes, she said, teachers faced with challenging and vulnerable students needed to recognise that bringing in other professionals such as social workers might be more effective.

Doing that would free up more time for teachers to focus on core work, including implementing world-class Scottish schemes that were driving school exclusions down, she said.

Speaking last week at an Edinburgh conference entitled Preventing and Managing Exclusions, Dr McCluskey – a former guidance teacher and current head of the university's Institute for Education, Community and Society – said: "Teachers are already giving 110 per cent to their job, by and large...I think people need to do less.

"Other professions have got structures with clear parameters for work, but teachers tend not to. We have become really good at saying yes and feeling responsible, when I think what we probably need to do is to say no to things more often."

She was responding to a question from a delegate about how overstretched staff could do more to reduce the need for pupils to be barred from classes.

Speaking to TESS, Dr McCluskey said: "Teachers have a unique position, working with the whole child over a long time, rather than only seeing them at crisis points, and for a lot of teachers the duty of care that they have is why they are in the job.

"But because of the lack of boundaries, it's harder to see where other people could usefully take over. Where you move from thinking, 'What can I do to support this child?' to 'Actually, this child needs more than I can give.'"

NASUWT, the UK's largest teachers' union, agreed that it was hard to strike the right balance. Spokesman Darren Northcott said: "It is a very big issue. And I think, particularly in Scotland, teachers do report that sometimes that balance is not being got right and perhaps too much falls on schools."

Dr McCluskey said that teachers should get involved with more schemes that gave children the confidence and skills to resolve their own issues, including peer mediation projects.

However, the ATL teaching union warned that although work on reducing exclusions was inspiring, teachers often lacked the autonomy to decide how best to deal with students.

Alastair MacPherson, president of ATL Scotland, said: "With some thought, most of us can think of alternative ways of viewing pupils' actions and responding to them. However, there are many pressures on teachers, not least from senior management, who may want a quicker fix.

"These days, teachers have less freedom in many schools to produce creative solutions; they are bound by so many rules and regulations. I am not confident that enough teachers would be certain of the support of their headteacher to wish to step outside their comfort zone unless they were highly motivated to do so."