Brighter Futures for Children

University of Reading

HearME

Young people recount their experiences of permanent exclusion from school

John Ord | Sally Lloyd-Evans | The Whitley Researchers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Our deepest thanks go to our young volunteer interviewees who gave an open and unreserved account of what permanent exclusion meant to them. Thanks also to their parents and guardians who consented to and supported the interviews.

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Brighter Futures for Children Tribute to John Ord

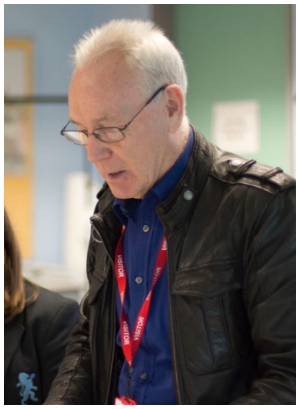
It is with great sadness that, as the collaboration between BFfC, The Whitley Researchers Collective and Reading University were finalising drafts and concluding this report; we learnt of the news that the main research fellow for this project, John Ord, had passed away.

John was pivotal to this project. His experience and passion for the rights and experiences of children and childhoods to be preserved by the adults around them was infectious and he brought the voices of the children and young people in this project to life.

We are thankful for all of John's work alongside BFfC, and on his passing, reading of his many achievements before this collaboration. He was an ambassador for children and young people and we are so grateful that we got to work with him on what was to be his final project.

Our condolences remain with John's family, friends and colleagues.

Paul Gresty (Education Strategic Lead) & Fiona Hostler (Safeguarding and Children Missing Education Officer) on behalf of Brighter Futures for Children.



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PREFACE

Reading Borough Council's Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) wished to explore the experiences of excluded pupils via three case studies through their own accounts. Although Reading's permanent exclusion rates compare favourably with national figures[1], the team were keen to hear from young people themselves about how they might continue to improve their processes and programmes. For example, BFfC have already commissioned therapeutic thinking schools but they wanted to better understand how their work in this field might be shaped further around the experiences of young people. There was also a deep understanding of the impact 'exclusion' has on the future life chances of children and youth. For example, a significant number of prolific offenders in Reading were or had been excluded from school for a fixed period or permanently. Excluded young people are much more likely to use high-cost tertiary and secondary interventions and be dependent on the state during their life course.

There was also an awareness that school exclusion in Reading reflected national concerns about the practice. Within UK schools in the academic year 2018/19 there were 430,000 fixed-term exclusions (19/20 data not available). The national rate of both fixed and permanent exclusion has been steadily rising over previous years. In Reading in 2019/20, there were 13 permanent exclusions and 619 fixed-term exclusions during the same period, a slight increase on 2018/19 but in line with trends in England.

A recent report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (Gill, 2017), *Making the Difference,* argued that alongside the growing number of official exclusions, there are also significant issues with how unofficial exclusions are being used by schools. It also highlighted that excluded children are often the most vulnerable: *"twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems."*

Nationally, in 2018/19, boys were over three times more likely than girls to face permanent exclusion, with 6,000 permanent exclusions compared to 1,900 for girls. Certain groups of students are far more likely to be permanently excluded:

- Free School Meals (FSM) pupils had a permanent exclusion rate four times higher than non-FSM pupils
- FSM pupils accounted for 40.0% of all permanent exclusions
- The permanent exclusion rate for boys was over three times higher than that for girls
- Over half of all permanent exclusions occur in national curriculum year 9 or above. A quarter of all permanent exclusions were for pupils aged 14
- Black Caribbean pupils had a permanent exclusion rate nearly three times higher than the school population as a whole
- Pupils with identified special educational needs (SEN) accounted for around half of all permanent exclusions.

In March of this year BFfC commissioned the University of Reading and its community research partner – the Whitley Researchers – to undertake a study of the impact permanent exclusion has had on three recently excluded young people. The study took a case study approach aimed at an attempt to understand the 'journey' leading to permanent exclusion and its consequences through their stories.

This report contains the findings and conclusions derived from the conversation shared with the young people. Our hope is that it will prompt a learning review of school exclusion and provide a spur to develop further good practice around prevention, early intervention and alternative provision.

Paul Gresty and Fiona Hostler

[1] Reading's Fixed Period Exclusion Rates for State Funded Secondary Schools was an average of 7.7% compared to the national average of 9.7% over the period 2013/14 to 2018/19

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning in March 2021, a joint research management team representing the University of Reading, Whitley Researchers and BFfC prepared plans for identifying and recruiting three young and recently permanently excluded pupils. A case study approach was adopted with the following remit provided by BFfC:

'*We are interested in understanding the journey of permanent exclusion and the impact of the experience on children and young people. We want to hear the honest and potentially uncomfortable views of the children and young people who have experienced permanent exclusion, and how various factors influences can increase or decrease the impact on the child or young person involved'.*

The aim of the research is to develop an understanding of the experiences of exclusion and of valued support from the perspectives of three young people recently excluded from Reading schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the young people's previous experiences of education and exclusion, to discover what support they had found helpful and to explore what further support they might have valued. The hope is that the study will garner how young people felt they were supported, or not, and treated within the primary settings they had been excluded from or were at risk of exclusion from.

An overriding concern was that the process of planning, preparation, contact, and confirmation followed the University of Reading's Ethical Practice Regulations – as an absolute priority - to ensure that the three interview participants and their parents or guardians were fully safeguarded with protected anonymity and confidentiality. No interview proceeded unless participants were fully informed of the aims and objectives of the research and confirmed their agreement to participate in interviews.

2. METHODOLOGY

Exploratory discussions on the feasibility of undertaking case studies with young (secondary school) pupils recently excluded permanently, began in January 2021 between staff at BFfC and the University of Reading. These positive discussions led to a formal agreement between the two parties to proceed with the research project in March.

From March to June several essential priorities were negotiated – chief among these being the discrete process of engaging the young people. Equally important, once potential interviewees had been identified, was consideration of the entire process leading to, during and after the interviews by the University Ethics Committee.

Once ethical permission had been granted the project moved to confirming the young person's participation including their consent and that of their parents or guardians. Arrangements were made for a two-stage process – firstly a preliminary meeting between the interviewer and the young person and their parents; this was to confirm some compatibility establishing a like-minded understanding and a clear awareness of what, where, how and when the interview would be conducted. Two weeks following this pre-meeting the full interviews were held.

Interview questions were co-produced with BFfC and a Consent Form required completion before the interview could commence. Each interview was recorded using a simple Dictaphone and the conversation followed a set of questions on each of the key themes including the school journey, experience of education, the exclusion process and what happened post-exclusion (see Appendix).

The transcribed record of each of the interviews forms the basis for this report and its conclusions, but it's important to note that the findings are solely based on the accounts of the young interviewees and not the schools or other stakeholders. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach and findings are presented as key themes that arose from hearing the contextual experiences of the young people's journeys in the lead up to, during and after the exclusion process.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: YOUNG PEOPLES EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL EXCLUSION

3.1 Introduction

Schools are central to the everyday lives of children and their families, and it is well established that young people permanently excluded from school also risk social exclusion on a deeper level. A substantial body of research finds that young people who have been through school exclusion are more likely than others to be involved in drugs and antisocial behaviour during adolescence (McCrystal et al, 2007), more likely to have contact with the justice system and experience unstable employment, poor mental health and homelessness (Pirrie et al, 2011; Thompson et al 2021). Likewise, Daniels and Cole (2010) find that exclusion is associated with low grades and with offending later, and *especially* if the pupils do not engage with their post-exclusion placement. Links between other forms of vulnerability to the disciplinary landscape of schools are also well established (Gazeley, 2010; Munn and Lloyd 2005), and young people excluded from school are often experiencing other forms of social exclusion linked to the intersection of social and educational inequalities (IPPR, 2017). Yet, there is a lack of qualitative research on young people's experiences of, and feelings about, being excluded from school.

Permanent school exclusions are much higher in England than in the rest of the UK, and this disproportionally affects young people from particular ethnic groups, those with SEND and living in poverty (Thompson et al, 2021). This trend led to the recent Timpson Review (DfE, 2019) that conducted a review of research to help explain the continued disproportionate exclusion of certain groups of children including, among others, Black Caribbean boys, Gypsy, Romany and Traveller children, children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and those eligible for free school meals. We will refer back to this report in our findings. Poor mental health and emotional trauma, which often leads to exclusion, is also on the increase for many communities, particularly those who are racially or politically minoritized. Permanent exclusions are much lower in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where trauma informed approaches and alternative provision are more established (Bunting et al, 2019). Table 1 shows how the number of exclusions has fallen in recent years until 2014 and then begun to rise, levelling off in 2017 at 0.1% of the total school population. Persistent disruptive behaviour was found to be common pre-exclusion, with actual or threatened assaults on pupil or staff being final triggers (Daniels and Cole, 2010).

Academic year	Numbers excluded	Rate
2006-07	8678	0.12
2007-08	8126	0.11
2008-09	6546	0.09
2009-10	5741	0.08
2010-11	5082	0.07
2011-12	5166	0.07
2012-13	4632	0.06
2013-14	4949	0.06
2014-15	5795	0.07
2015-16	6684	0.08
2016-17	7719	0.10
2017-18	7905	0.10
2018-19	7894	0.10

Table 1: Levels of permanent school exclusion in England over time (Source Gov.UK, n.d.)

Reasons for the fall then rise in the number of exclusions were explored by Cole et al. (2019). They argue that proactive intention on the part of the government to reduce school exclusions and to provide funding for the effective support of pupils at risk is a key factor. Following from this, Local Authority personnel and school staff must themselves share an inclusive ethos, commit to inclusive practice, and

shape their policies and practice accordingly. The employment of support teachers, pastoral support/counsellors, educational psychologists, education welfare officers, family link-workers and social workers is required to support pupils at risk and their families, enabling on and off-site interventions and adding to the training of school staff. Recent focus on the welfare and emotional well-being of young people is also aligned with research that centres school as a key space for shaping young people's social identities and sense of belonging, the latter being particularly important in the exclusion journey of the young people we interviewed. As we explore later, intersectional factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class also increase the risk of exclusion for some groups of young people (Feyisa, 2021).

Following a brief review of recent academic and policy literature on school exclusions, our research with three young people draws upon several bodies of scholarship that helped us better understand their stories and experiences of exclusion: *youth transitions; emotions, belonging and intersectionality; the importance of relationships; and young people's rights.*

3.2 Schools and youth transitions

Although the concept of youth transition from childhood to adulthood is frequently contested, there is agreement that young people's pathways are *diverse, non-linear and shaped by structural inequalities* (Furlong, 2009; Wyn et al, 2014; Wenham, 2020). Despite this knowledge, schools (powerful sites of regulation, control and governance) are often shaped by universal social norms about young people's behaviour and conformity, a process that serves to marginalise young people who come to be seen as 'different' in some way. Since the 1990s, there has also been policy focus on educational outcomes as the panacea to tackle poverty and social inequalities but with solutions that tend to focus on 'problems' as individual shortcomings, rather than a result of processes that are largely outside of the control of young people (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Social geographers have argued for more attention to be paid to the role of schools in shaping young people's social identities and emotions, particularly around the reproduction of what we might call 'preferred identities' within educational settings (Collins and Coleman, 2008: 281). Schools can be powerful, institutional space for regulating children's behaviour through a common set of rules, regulations and behavioural norms that are often gendered, racialised and class based.

As discussed in the introduction, there is growing concern over the rising numbers of students excluded from school in England, where on average 35 children every day are excluded from School (Power and Taylor, 2020), and at a time when there is a lack of resources to support young people at risk (Grazeley et al, 2015). It is argued by Wyn et al (2014) in the context of Australian research that the reinstatement of traditional, 'high stakes' testing regimes has led to the disengagement of students who may struggle academically with an increasing amount of students also excluded for non-conformity of rules around uniform and behaviour (Power and Taylor, 2020). The other side of the coin is that exam and academic performance places an enormous amount of pressure on staff, particularly senior leadership, so that activities that do not serve the regime are often removed.

Cole et al. (2019) also argued that the academisation of schools (who get money directly instead of via Local Authorities) can mean that schools come into competition with one another. Competition can damage relationships, reducing collaboration and making schools less willing to take on excluded children or to add to the stresses of their own teachers. The Local Authorities have less leverage in cases of dispute and headteachers have a potentially confusing array of options (not all of which are good) when it comes to buying in services for their SEN pupils. Besides their plea a change in priorities and more funding to provide for pupils at risk of exclusion, Cole et al. (2019) add that if relationships within the school are impossible to fix, there is still the possibility of making a 'managed move' for a 'fresh start' rather than framing the move as exclusion. Pupil Referral Units with small groups in a therapeutic and nurturing environment can help as these are places where students feel supported with their mental health, as well as learning, and this resonates with our findings. In seeking to better understand the processes that lead to exclusion, one of the emerging themes from the young people we spoke with was the role of emotional trauma and feelings of non-belonging.

3.3 Emotions, belonging and intersectionality

Children's geographies has increasingly paid attention to the importance of emotions in the lives of children and young people (Blazek and Kraftl, 2015; Blazek and Windram-Gedded, 2013) whilst others have looked at the emotional aspects of race and ethnicity (Zembylas, 2011), class based identities (2011; Holt, Bowlby and Lea, 2013) and gendered identities (Haavind et al, 2014). Despite this emphasis, *emotions* are often deemed unimportant in young people's school lives. Kustatscher (2017) argues that emotions are hugely significant in shaping how children's intersectional identities are performed in school, particularly in their peer relationships. According to Davies (2008:67), intersectionality refers to the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination. Schools are interesting emotional landscapes as they are heavily regulated and controlled, particularly in terms of behaviour, uniform and appearance. They are also extremely important for shaping the ways in which children construct and perform their identities in the classroom or playground and this identity construction also produces complex forms of belonging and/or exclusion in their everyday school lives. A sense of belonging (Slee, 2019) is constituted by a young person's emotions, relationships and attachments as well as their positionalities in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality or disability.

A literature review undertaken by Graham et al (2019:7) as part of the 2019 *Timpson Review* also reported that:

"*The extent to which pupils felt they 'belonged' in a school was identified as critical in some of the research. This included feeling valued as an individual, having good relationships with peers and teachers, and feeling that their needs were understood and addressed.*"

In her qualitative research on the emotional geographies of primary schools, Kustatscher (2017) observed that children not seen to be conforming to social norms or particular identities were often bullied, ridiculed and marginalised and that over time, such feelings resulted in behaviour that is considered unacceptable (Parker et al, 2016). As our research will highlight, our case study participants talked about years of bullying, poor mental health or feeling isolated at school that culminated in frequent emotional outbursts and there is an urgent need for greater understanding of how the *emotions of belonging* within the school setting, particularly in terms of their peer relationships, are performed, handled and understood:

"The importance of emotions for politicised social identities emphasise the need for an intersectional lens to understanding the complex links between identities, power and space of belonging" (Kustatscher, 2017:65)

The concept of intersectionality is also useful here as it draws attention to understanding how young people experience belonging and the power relations involved in their school exclusion journey. Kustatscher (ibid) argues that there is a need to understand how intersectional identities (gender, class, ethnicity, race, disability or sexuality) shape young people's relationships with peers and staff, how they are performed and the extent to which they are politicised. Bringing an intersectional lens to the study of children's identities and sense of belonging at school also draws attention to the ways teachers and schools react to diversity. Hamilton (2018) talks about schools as "white spaces" and other research argues that black children as not viewed as 'ideal learners' which excludes them from classroom activities.

Whilst emotions have also entered policy debates through discussion around neurodiversity (Pykett, 2017 2008) and emotional literacy (Kraftl, 2013), and whilst there is increasing attention to mental health through trauma-informed practices, much of this work focuses on the family or the home rather than how young people's *sense of belonging also comes to be constructed, politicised and performed at school*. Bullying, social isolation and feeling disconnected are important triggers for the 'bad behaviours' or performing identities 'correctly' (Yuval-Davis, 2011) which can lead to permanent exclusion.

3.4 Relationships

Another common theme in published research is the importance of young people's school relationships, and our previous research with young people in schools has discussed the importance of meaningful trusted relationships with peers and adults (Whitley Researchers, 2018). Daniels and Cole (2010) highlight relationships as one of three factors which are associated with less chance of exclusion:

1. Mutually beneficial and supportive relationships with adults and with peers:
    - Some affectionate relationships, building resilience
    - Supportive social networks on a wider scale with adults that the young person can grow to trust and respect
    - A pro-social peer group
2. Learning to read at an early age
3. Developing an internal locus of control (feeling in control of one's own destiny)

Children without mutually beneficial and supportive relationships, children unable to keep up with the school programme and children who feel they have no control over what happens to them are significantly more likely to end up excluded from school and excluded on a deeper level as well. Daniels and Cole (2010) add that boys are four times more likely to be excluded than girls and SEN pupils nine times more likely to be excluded than the rest of the school population. Black children and looked-after children are also higher-risk groups. Secondary school exclusions are higher than primary school exclusions, and special school exclusions are the highest of all.

In terms of preventing exclusions, Cole et al. (2019) emphasised the importance of recognising that there are reasons behind challenging behaviour which need to be explored; poor relationships often being at the root of the problem and being central to restoration. Approaching challenging behaviour in this way; catching problems early, identifying triggers, personally working through coping strategies with the child and making interventions as little intrusive as possible was found to be more effective than setting targets a child is likely to fail and then pursuing a punishment strategy. On-site specialist provision is a first line of action for children who are not able to engage in the classroom.

Provision for Special Educational Needs (SEN) must be good, providing content in a flexible and differentiated manner such that those who find learning difficult are still able to engage (Sproston et al, 2017). On-site specialist provision is a first line of action for children who are not able to engage in the classroom. Supporting children at risk of exclusion requires funding in order to bring in specialist help, and good collaborative links with wider agencies involved in family support (such as social workers, youth justice workers, and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)). However, many schools are under financial pressure which was seen to force headteachers to take the cheaper option of excluding a challenging child over putting in a support package. Moreover, the accountability systems schools face can undermine inclusivity by putting more weight on academic achievement than on helping those who are falling behind. Ranking systems for example make little allowance for context such as social deprivation in the catchment area, even though wider society issues (parenting and social deprivation) play such an important part in child outcomes. With money being tight, cutting pastoral support and support for SEN pupils is often done because of making no contribution to the all-important Progress 8 results.

Cole et al. (2019) also argued that the academisation of schools (who get money directly instead of via Local Authorities) can mean that schools come into competition with one another. Competition can damage relationships, reducing collaboration and making schools less willing to take on excluded children or to add to the stresses of their own teachers. Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the voices of children themselves are often unheard.

3.5 Young people's voices and rights

Young people who have reached the point of permanent exclusion are likely to have experienced a range of disciplinary sanctions which may include school isolation units, fixed terms exclusions and alternative provision. To-date, much of the knowledge on the experiences of excluded students is based on the

experiences of parents and professional staff and while this is valuable, it fails to highlight the students' voice and journey. There is some research around SEN and autism (Sproston et al 2017) and exclusions in primary schools (Jarvis, 2018), but there's a lack of qualitative research that focuses on the stories and voices of older pupils. As we'll discuss in Section 4, one of the most striking features of the interviews with our young participants was the lack of opportunity to give their side of the story or discuss what their options might be.

As to the perceptions of excluded young people, 50% of those interviewed by Daniels and Cole (2010) felt that the exclusion was damaging to themselves (due to lost education and stigma over their future) whilst 19% felt that the exclusion had a positive effect on their lives (at least in terms of giving them relief from school). The picture that Daniels and Cole build up from their interviews with excluded pupils over time tended to be one of limited horizons, lack of self-belief, an expectation of failure and increasing marginalisation. Social isolation locked them out of opportunities existing in the wider world – their lack of connections excluding them from help into employment, plus low self-esteem and low confidence reinforced isolation and further withdrawal.

Children's rights and their ability to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives maps closely onto the school exclusion debates but as McCluskey et al (2015) argue, there is little research on the links between school exclusions and child rights. The UN Commission for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1999, is a rights-based framework that covers all aspects of a child's life and of particular relevance to school exclusion is Article 12:

> *"every child has the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them and for their views to be taken seriously"* (Article 12, UNCRC, 1999)

According to McCluskey et al (ibid: 605), Article 12 is a *gateway right* as without it, children will have difficulties in accessing other rights. Their research on the processes of exclusion in Wales, found that excluded children revealed a lack of "confidence in their right to have a place in education and a lack of confidence in those around them".

A rights-based framework could provide an action plan for developing a more youth centred and inclusive process for young people at risk from school exclusion and we will return to this in the concluding section.

Present proposal

In light of this knowledge, we were asked to explore the experiences of a few of Reading's excluded young people and bring their voices to these debates. What their experience was – the journey, the school environment, their relationships and emotional wellbeing before, during and after the exclusion process. Also, how they felt they were treated and supported and anything else they would have wanted at that time.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The research findings presented in this section are based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with three young people of secondary school age who had been permanently excluded from school in the last two years. To protect their identities, we will not reveal any personal information about themselves or their schools, but they included both male and female students from different ethnic backgrounds and schools. Some of the extracts from the interviews have also been made gender neutral (e.g her/him or sister/brother) to provide further anonymity.

As shown in the Appendix, the structure of our interviews was influenced by Jarvis' (2018) doctoral research and focused initially on the *school journey, experiences of education and experience of exclusion*. Our thematic approach takes this line of analysis, but we've added a further set of interconnected themes around relationships, belonging and emotional wellbeing that help us to tell their stories.

4.1. The school journey – *"I literally couldn't speak to nobody"*

Our participants' stories of school were rich and insightful, and although they came from different communities there were several common themes that emerged around their experiences of schooling that played a crucial role in their exclusion journey.

Transition from primary to secondary school

By and large, primary school is perceived as good but secondary is bad. The transition was not smooth for any of the young people we interviewed; it was difficult and sometimes even traumatic. Primary school is associated with being 'fun', less strict, and where not conforming to rules, such as uniform, was tolerated. It was also a place where "*I also felt like I was very different than everyone else"* as participants' started to be aware of their own identities' compared to other children. Primary school is possibly more accepting of difference, although it was also a place young people gained reputations for "*being naughty":*

> *"Primary school was alright. I did alright there. I started getting naughty when I was in year 5 up to year 6. I don't know why. I just messed about"*

For some young people who already felt different and out of place at primary school, going to secondary school can be traumatic and one recounted how "*I hated it, from the moment I started year seven".*

One of the significant factors is that subjects change and become harder, and pupil interest in what might be learned narrows considerably. Our interviewees liked only a few subjects such as Drama or PE, but they found other subjects that they had enjoyed at primary school, like Maths and English, more difficult. This resonates with existing research around the importance of learning to read early (Daniels and Cole, 2010). Additional support like quiet spaces to do tests and one-to-one assistance are often absent:

> *"In primary school they like I could... I don't know what they said but they said that I could like... I couldn't focus around like everyone so I had to go to like a room upstairs...*
>
> *And I had to go and do my test there, but then in secondary school they just they didn't... nothing happened, I just had to sit in a big class and then I would just be scared like because I didn't know what to do. And like it feels like if it was in primary school like I know the teachers in the room that I can ask her can you like explain what this is or can you explain what I have to do..."*

Students talked about subjects being "*really, really hard"* with no-one to help:

> *"If I struggle with something I'll just have to go look it up on Google, like if I don't know what something is I will look it up on Google"*

For others, the difficulty started when their primary school friends moved to different schools, and they had to make new friends. Problems with peer friendships and good relationships with teachers was another recurring theme.

Relationships with teachers and peers

Teachers in primary school are different from secondary school teachers. The former are friendly and helpful and listen to you – the latter are distant, strict, demanding and short-term. An overriding grievance of all three participants was the failure of teachers to *listen* to their concerns as one participant recalls when they had told teachers they were being bullied:

I: And how did the teachers react?

P: They didn't. I told them but then they were just like they would tell the person oh, stop it, stop it, stop it and that would be it.

I: That didn't work then?

P: No.

I: Why not?

P: Because they wouldn't listen because they knew that each time I told the teacher the teacher wouldn't do anything

I: So why wouldn't the teachers do anything, do you think?

P: I don't know. I don't think they thought it was going... it's serious.

Commonly expressed by the young interviewees was a strong feeling of *"not being listened to*" which over time builds feelings of isolation, injustice, and despair. Generally, at secondary school there is one teacher/member of staff and one only who listens, but they are not always helpful or they move on. Subjects they liked were often linked to a particular teacher that they felt listened to them and understood that they were having a difficult time:

> *"He just listened to what you had to say. And if like something happened he would listen to your side and then the other person's side and then come to like a decision, like he wouldn't just blame the student, so he was very like he just listened to everything that had to be said"*

Students also told us about other teachers that targeted them when there was a problem and made them feel responsible, and that such reputations may stem from primary school:

> *"Like even if I'd like if something happened in school she would get me... like if something happened in a class she would be like, oh, [name], did you see this and like as soon as I say yes, I did, she would be like right, what happened, tell me why, why did you do this? Like she would like try and bring me into it"*

> *"If one of my friends flipped a chair and he wouldn't get into trouble but if I flipped the chair then I would get in trouble. They would always tell me and my friend off but no one else"*

> *"Because at the end of the day like you're going to get in trouble no matter what you say. Like if there's like something... if there's like a back-and-forth argument or something like that, at the end of it you're going to get proven wrong by the teacher because she'll either give you a detention..."*

> *"Most of the time I would come home crying because I just felt like, well, I'm getting the blame for something that isn't even me...And I'd try and explain that it isn't me, I'd try and explain obviously the situation and I'd just get ignored"*

Being made to stand out by teachers because of a 'different', intersectional identity, as identified in section 3 also added to student's frustrations:

> *"Like it was just like I feel like it was to do with like me. Like because I used to have long hair… And then I cut my hair and then I thought... I think like the teachers thought that obviously I was part of the LGBTQ... And then like they just started like they would do... like if we learn about LGBTQ community they would be like oh (name of student), I know you know loads about this thing, like*

do you know what it is, like they were assuming things, they didn't ask me if I was normal or straight or anything, like they will just assume because I cut my hair"

Peer friendships also really count but we found that friendship circles are usually few in number. They are 'people like me' but a real source of support and help nevertheless:

"We kind of kept ourselves to ourselves. Like everyone else had their own groups and it was like, well, we didn't really speak to anyone else and we just felt like having a smaller group was so much better because anything you spoke about wouldn't of went as far… Or like wouldn't have got in a tangle and rumours would have been spread"

"I just felt like anything was wrong, again, I could do to them and speak to them about it, they'd listen… And most of the time they would agree with me about things".

However, troubled pupils often have troubled friends:

"I didn't really have many friends. There were two friends I stuck with throughout the whole of school… but teachers reckoned that us three hanging around got us all in trouble… we weren't even naughty"

Having someone to listen and support is crucial: trust, being fair, listening, being understood, having a voice all matters, particularly when young people are facing difficult circumstances at home. Already feeling on the margins, distrustful of school gossip and feeling isolated, many stories resonated with Kustatscher (2017) research on the importance of *feeling a sense of belonging* in school.

Finally, what was crucially important for the young people we spoke with was support at home. They mentioned parents, siblings and other adults as playing a vital role in listening to their difficult experiences of school and the phrase "calming me down" was often used. However, this support network cannot be accessed during the school day and for some, having an older sibling at school was essential to their everyday mental health but another trigger point was when they left school:

"So and my brother/sister went there, so my older brother/sister, when I started he/she was still there, he/she is now 18, if anything was wrong I would go... I would normally go to speak to him/her about it, and even then, if I like had a mental breakdown and I'd go well, can I go and see my brother/sister, because obviously they knew how to calm me down..."

Although the interviewees all had a small circle of good friends, they often need additional support from trusted adults when they felt particularly upset and vulnerable.

4.2. Emotional experiences of education: *"push buttons" and "throwing a kid in a box"*

As section 3 highlighted, understanding the power of young people's emotional trauma is crucial for recognising the *"push buttons"* or trigger points that led to exclusion of the young people we talked with. Emotions are crucial for shaping young people's intersectional identities and belonging at school (Kustatscher, 2016) and some interviewees openly talked about their mental health and lack of support at secondary school. Moreover, some of them had experienced extreme trauma in the past as a result of family bereavement or severe illness and this was aggravated through everyday experiences of bullying.

Secondary school is a place where other students started to *"push my buttons*" and trigger the emotional outbursts that are often identified as disruptive:

"When I went on my visit to secondary school a boy/girl hit me. I tried to fight him/her and then I kept getting in trouble from that first visit.

The first proper day was alright and then it kept being good but I started being naughty when I got used to the school. I got excluded a lot and had to go into isolation a lot. I bunked lessons and had fights, swearing and messing about"

"So ever since I joined the school there was this one boy/girl and he/she would just like be there, like everywhere I looked they would be there, like it was... it was... yeah, like everywhere I looked

like this boy/girl would just be there and like he/she wouldn't just be there, standing there, he/she would be looking at me, he/she would give me the evils..."

Bullying, belonging and mental health

All three of the participants talked about on-going experiences of bullying and abuse from other students, and occasionally staff. They talked about an event or a particular time when they switched off from school completely. Year 9 or 10 was common and was associated with constantly feeling bullied by their peers for something traumatic that had happened at home, their appearance or being 'out of place' which severely impacted on their mental and physical health:

"I got picked on, I got bullied…I didn't feel like anything I did was fair, I literally couldn't go anywhere without being in trouble, I was just spied on all the time… And I was just like this isn't how school is meant to be"

"Like sometimes I wouldn't want to go school because of the things they were saying and I was just... Almost embarrassing and then I lost so many friends because of it, because people like... people just start laughing, they'll just be like ha-ha, just laughing"

The interviewees also told us stories about how teachers wouldn't take their mental or physical illnesses seriously or respect their need to take medication or go home. Not being 'understood or listened to' can have a serious impact on mental health and their responses were often emotional outbursts that resulted in disciplinary sanctions, such as detentions and isolation rooms that we explore more in the next section:

"I just get angry and then like I will tell... I will try to go to like the student support hub but then they'll just be like oh, leave it, leave it, leave it and I'm just like how can I leave something?"

"But we all was like well, we don't find how it's fair that they've given up on me and kicked me out when there's kids at school fighting every day, which we all have proof of... But they don't get in trouble, but if you get someone that's suffering with mental health, no, we don't want you in our school"

Relationship breakdowns with friends and peers, and being wrongly accused for something they didn't do were also common experiences at this time. As a result, the interviewees find themselves on the fringes of school life by about Year 9 – it's a self-reinforcing location easily cemented by a variety of punishments. No teacher or behavioural system seems capable of transitioning them from fringe to mainstream.

A picture emerges of young people feeling out of place, 'picked on', bullied by peers and voiceless. For some students, this is also related to their intersectional social identities, related to gender, race and class, that don't confirm to prevailing social norms in the school. For some young people, bullying is racialised and/or gendered.

In summary:

- There is no support other than close-knit friendship groups and apparently *"nobody listens".*
- There is also a detectable sense of hopelessness or resignation – being 'naughty' attracts labelling and stereotyping as well as blame – there's a very strong sense of being scapegoated - 'If this is what they think I am then this is what I'll be.'
- The almost complete absence of support including nobody who listens and certainly no preparedness to engage in discussion with a teacher – a dialogue even – reinforces the sense of powerlessness and injustice and hence despair.

Experiences of isolation and child rights

Young people who have reached the point of permanent exclusion are likely to have experienced a range of disciplinary sanctions which may include school isolation units, fixed terms exclusions and alternative provision. If we return to the factors that help prevent exclusion, outlined by Coles et al (2019) and others, then developing an internal locus of control (feeling in control of one's own destiny) is important for building resilience.

The reality for our interviewees is that their sense of control or power over their situation was further removed using isolation and curtailment of basic *freedoms*, such as eating lunch with friends or going to the bathroom. One of the most traumatic and distressing experiences is that of isolation in booths or cubicles – an experience felt like incarceration in prison with very limited capacity to move about, containment for long periods and a clear element of sensory deprivation and with very little work to do or work that's too hard or too easy:

> *"I got put in isolation more... more or less every other week, I got the blame for other people's behaviour and I had to sit detentions for it, I got detentions for things I didn't do, I was in detentions and isolation for something I don't even know, I don't even know to this day why I was in there"*

As discussed in section 3, the UNCRC (1999) provides guidelines for children's rights, particularly around the right to be involved in decision making but also their access to toilet facilities, food and drink, and fresh air (see Box 1). It could be argued that the use of isolation rooms, seen as "throwing a kid in a box" by one interviewee, are an infringement of these rights.

Box 1: A conversation about being in isolation

Interviewer (I): what does isolation involve? I don't know about it, what is it?

Participant (P): So, it's basically a room and you sit in there from the time that... so say period one started at half-eight...You would get put in there at half-eight and you would be made to sit in there 'til 4 o'clock in the evening, you wouldn't be allowed to go outside for any fresh air...

You wouldn't be allowed to go outside for any fresh air, you would only be allowed to go to the toilet if a teacher escorts you, and you would have lunch brought to you and it would be whatever was on the list, you wouldn't be allowed to choose what it was.

I: Did... or could you associate with other people in the isolation room?

P: No, you wasn't allowed to speak. You literally... it was literally a table with boards around it and a chair...

I: But what would you do when you were sat there all day?

P: Either stare at it or do work. But you get made to do work that you've never done before, you just get handed a booklet and be like, well, you've got to do this.

I: Was it hard work...?

P: And if you don't complete it..

P: Yeah, really hard. And if you don't complete then got in there the next day, at the exact same time, from the moment you get into school, for the moment you leave. Literally, day after day.

P: And then you'd have to sit... like, so say you got put in isolation but then the day before you got a detention, you'd have to do that detention in isolation the day after.

I: How did you react to it?

P: Obviously, I would get mad about it...Because, to me, you should at least be able to go outside for some fresh air, even if it's for five or 10 minutes... Instead of being sat in a room all day boiling hot, even in the summer...You'd have to sit in the room.

I: When you got mad about it, did you try to get out or...?

P: Yeah, I've walked out, I walked out plenty of times because I just generally...Couldn't sit in there anymore.

Instead of lengthy isolation, interviewees talked about needing a safe space with someone supportive to "calm down" for twenty minutes:

> *"I find it wrong how they make you sit in a classroom for that long without having...*
>
> *Like air...*

And without going outside and without choosing what food you like.

But if, say, you're disrupting the class then maybe go outside for 15/20 minutes, calm yourself down and then go back in...

And then if you're still disrupting the class then yes, because you've been given a chance to change and you clearly haven't...

So yes. But on the other hand, no, because you're throwing a kid in a box, as I would say, for that long, not being allowed to go to the toilet, not being allowed air and not even being allowed a drink, you're only allowed a drink at lunch"

In the conclusions, we suggest that using a rights-based lens to review the current school exclusion system could provide a way forward for teachers and students.

4.3. Experiences of exclusion: *"they didn't let me talk"*

The interviewees in the main do not have a school history of 'good behaviour' but there appears to be an inexorable continuum that travels from multiple detentions to internal isolation, temporary exclusion to permanent exclusion. And little evidence of serious attempts to divert or prevent what seems like a pre-ordained path. There are three common experiences that we would like to highlight.

Firstly, permanent exclusion has its roots in a significant history of behavioural breakdowns usually preceded by almost intolerable pressure felt by the interviewees because of – in some cases – lengthy internal isolation and bullying. There is a major crisis – a particularly shocking incident – leading to immediate exclusion later confirmed as permanent as the following three incidents illustrate:

"I kind... I kind of was... I... I... because when I'm angry I... I just don't know what I'm doing so then I grabbed him/her and then... I grabbed him/her by the hair, I pulled him/her up the stairs and then I just started punching, kicking, I was just trying to get all my anger out, like..." Yeah, that... like I think everything, like even if like he/she wasn't involved in something, everything what happened like just came out and I lay it out into (him/her)..."

"X came one day and I was chewing gum. He asked me to spit it out. He kept staring at me and I told him not to. He got everyone else out the room and I tried to leave too but he wouldn't let me. He locked me in the room and I was trying to push past him and I got mad and started flipping everything in the room"

"There was this guy/girl in my school and like every single day, ever since primary school he/she just like been on my back, like saying things here, saying comments, saying here, and then one day I just got angry and then like he/she was talking so much that he/she spat in my food and.. I... I just... I don't like spit, I don't like [saliva]..I don't like anything like that and then I kind of just got angry and I started... like my anger tears were coming, I was shaking...And then like he/she said something that triggered me and then I just slapped him/her and then I threw my food on him/her and I tried to walk away and he/she was like oh, no, I'm going to slap him/her, I'm going to slap him/her, so I went up to him/her and I was like slap me then and then he/she just walked away and that was it"

For others, exclusion stemmed from what they described as a 'mental breakdown in school' that was perceived as disruptive behaviour as one interviewee recalls:

"*I went into school and I had a mental breakdown in school, I just started...crying…I walked out of class because I didn't want to be sat in class with everyone staring at me while I was crying...And teachers literally had a go at me, well, you shouldn't walk out of class, even if you're struggling, that's... they're your lesson time, you shouldn't be using it to sit out and cry, so they kicked me out. And like...*

I walked out, I went and sat outside for some fresh air and then a teacher came down and was like, well, what are you doing? I explained it to them and they said well, that's not an excuse to walk out of class.

I got mad because obviously I still couldn't cope with anything. I had so many things going through my head... I just generally wanted to just scream.

I went back to class, (named teacher) came over and was like, well, you're going home, I said well why, she said we're excluding you, I said well, generally, what have I done, and she was like well, you're a distraction, we need you to go home"

Secondly, a teacher or teachers enforce the rapid ejection from the premises with pupils initially sent home with fixed exclusions without any discussion about their behaviour or a chance to tell their side of the story. As Collins and Coleman (2008: 289) argue:

> "within school environments, children's rights appear to have limited purchase. Debates about curricula (i.e. what children will learn, and how), for example, are conducted almost exclusively by adults, in adult terms, with scant if any regard to the notion that young people are entitled to a voice in matters concerning them (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12)"

After an incident, one of the interviewees talked about being removed to another class without any discussion of what had occurred:

P: "And then I had to sit like into a totally different class. I didn't get given any work, I didn't get like told like to sit somewhere to like calm down, anything like that, did no one explained anything to me, no one asked me if I'm okay, if I'm hurt, yeah. I just came home and then I told my mum what happened and she was like stop joking, she didn't think I was serious because I always joke around about everything, I can't be serious and everything, and then they called her and then she was... they were like..."

I: Okay. So you'd been told that day that you were suspended...

P: Yeah.

I: Did they say suspended for a while?

P: They said for five days

Thirdly, what seems common is that when they are initially sent home, they are told it's for a fixed term only but that changes without discussion a few days later:

"I just got told that I was being excluded for that day and that I would have to go in I think it was three days later and a couple of days later, before I went back in, my mum got a letter to say that I was permanently excluded"

Parents/guardians are invited to the school where the Head teacher and a colleague confirm the exclusion as no longer fixed but permanent. There is no appeal allowed – the decision is final. Subsequently, a meeting with Governors follows that rubber-stamps the teaching staff decision. The interviewees give various responses to these meetings suggesting that they were not given a fair hearing and that (from the interviewees) there is no right to appeal or at least no knowledge of this right conveyed to the interviewees or parents/guardians as one parent recounts:

"So after... after three days they called me for meeting, I'm not well, you can see, I have …. and they let me walk to the school... I walked to the school, they said they want to have a meeting with me and it was raining, I went to the school...

And when I went to the school they didn't ask me anything. When I got there the head teacher says, (name), help your … to sit down, I was shocked.

They didn't let me talk. So I was begging for them to punish .... (name) like you will stay home for two weeks, you come back to this school... the head teacher told me we don't need (name) in this school again..." (parent who joined one of the interviews towards the end)

Furthermore, the sense of unfairness is compounded when some interviewees/parents find that they have been removed to a PRU with no consultation or prior discussion:

"But they... before me and my mum already knew they had already put the forms into (named Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)). To say that obviously I was permanently excluded and there was no... that would mean no going back before my mum and me even knew... So then me and my mum obviously found out that I was going to (named PRU) and we was like, well, hold on a minute, why haven't we been told about this?

It appears that a school's behavioural codes can very quickly compound what might generally be regarded as trifling matters into serious accusations that require ultimate punishments such as permanent exclusion. None of our participants were given any support or guidance regarding the decision. It also seems that systems and teacher decisions on discipline do prevail over more caring responses and that some academies might be sliding from accountability?

Two of the young people we interviewed moved to a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) and the move was largely beneficial because PRU's provide the therapeutic and flexible learning environment that is often missing from mainstream school - here teachers listen and discuss matters with you, and they offer real help in gaining qualifications and help with planning futures. Their experiences resonate with other research on alternative provision (McCluskey et al, 2015) as students are in small classes with innovative teachers that use more interactive learning techniques, and they talked about their behaviour improving:

"My behaviour at home has been better since I have been at (named PRU) so I get on better with my mum and nan. It isn't even bad at (named PRU), people that haven't been there don't know what it is like"

"The support they had was unreal"

Although it can be a fresh start, with one student stating that it was *"the best thing I've ever done",* the longer-term educational outcomes and risk factors of being permanently excluded from mainstream school indicate that it shouldn't be considered the best option for young people needing a more supportive learning environment or who were victims of bullying or racism. Although, the young participants in this study view exclusion as the 'right thing' for serious infringements of rules, including carrying knives or outright violence, they believe that more should be done to prevent it in the first place. While PRUs provide excellent support and Reading has a successful reintegration rate back into mainstream school, which was 66% in 2020/21, the trauma of exclusion can stay with young people and families for life. For these participants, a more therapeutic and supportive school environment with a flexible curriculum might have prevented permanent exclusion in the first place. In mainstream school, feeling a sense of belonging, having 'fair' hearings and supportive teachers, good relationships and a right to be heard, really count.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This report's case studies have been conducted in line with a bold remit from BFfC which included: 'we want to hear the honest and potentially uncomfortable views of (those) who have experienced permanent exclusion'.

There is a view that truth lies midway between extremes and that a perspective from one side must be balanced with a contrasting perspective. It is also the case that the views of our interviewees can be challenged from the schools that excluded them. As we outlined in the methodology, this research only seeks to tell the stories from the perspectives of three young people and our conclusions focus solely on the disclosures made by our interviewees, which expose a failure to recognise the needs and the rights of some children.

The interview process has attempted to ensure that every step has been taken to foster an authentic and reliable response from our interviewees. The responses recounted here certainly ring true and must therefore provide an irrefutable basis for action, recommendations, and reflection on policy, even though there is a need for further research with schools, teachers, and other stakeholders.

Our conclusions include:

The School Journey

- By and large, primary school is 'good' but secondary is 'bad'. The transition is not smooth but difficult and even traumatic. In some cases, patterns of negative behaviour are carried across the transition and there appears to be no attempt to put a graduated system in place.

- Subjects change and become difficult and pupil interest in what might be learned narrows considerably – interviewees like only a few subjects. There appears to be a preference for more active subjects such as drama or sports and less attachment to more academic studies. Children who learn to read early as less likely to be at risk of exclusion and this could be a focus for further development in Reading.

- Teachers in primary school are different from secondary school teachers. The former are friendly and helpful and listen to you – the latter are distant, strict, demanding and short-term. Generally, at secondary there is one teacher and one only, who listens but they are not always helpful or they move on. High teacher turnover appears to be a contributory factor in student attachment to learning.

- Relationships really count – friendship circles are usually few in number, 'like me' and a real source of support and help. Troubled pupils have troubled friends. Close knit friendship groups are also protective structures not least because of group member or individual experience of bullying or discrimination whether racial or disability based (e.g. chronic illness, mental ill health) or perceived sexual orientation. There appears to be little recourse to either support or reconciliation to help resolve these issues or incidents.

- The interviewees find themselves on the fringes of school life – it's a self-reinforcing location easily cemented by a variety of punishments. No teacher or behavioural system seems capable of transitioning students from fringe to mainstream. The systems of behaviour management in place have little flexibility and can rapidly transform trifling matters to serious accusations and punishments; not helped by language usage e.g. a fight might be described as 'assault'. Too few teachers are perceived as positively engaged in seeking more humane or caring options due to pressures on their time.

Emotional Experiences of Education

- Understanding young people's emotional trauma is crucial for recognising the *"push buttons"* or trigger points that led to exclusion of the young people we talked with. Our research has highlighted the importance of focusing on the emotional well-being of students, particularly those experiencing poor mental health or family difficulties, and the extent to which pupils feel a sense of belonging in school. There is often no support other than close-knit friendship groups and apparently 'nobody listens'. Sympathetic teachers are in very short supply due to extreme pressures of the current education system and trauma informed approaches are important.

- Young people's feelings of belonging and inclusion are also related to their intersectional identities, particularly in relation to gender, race and ethnicity, and students who feel different or 'othered' become marginalised. There is also a detectable sense of hopelessness or resignation – being 'naughty' attracts labelling and stereotyping as well as blame – there's a very strong sense of being scapegoated. 'If this is what they think I am then this is what I'll be.' A greater emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion training for staff and students could be a positive step forward.

- The almost complete absence of support including nobody who listens and certainly no preparedness to engage in discussion with a teacher – a dialogue even – reinforces the sense of powerlessness and injustice and hence despair. Interviewees comment on the lack of attempts to 'bring both sides together' to attempt reconciliation.

- One of the most traumatic and distressing experiences is that of isolation in booths or cubicles – an experience which feels like incarceration in prison with very limited capacity to move about, make a toilet visit, get some fresh air and containment for long periods. There's a clear element of sensory deprivation and with very little work to do or work that's too hard or too easy. Efforts at containment or confinement were so severe and intolerable to the students that they led directly to incidents that the school interpreted as warranting permanent exclusion. A child rights-based approach could provide a framework for moving these discussions forward.

- The interviewees in the main do not have a school history of good behaviour but there appears to be an inexorable continuum that travels from multiple detentions to internal isolation, temporary exclusion to permanent exclusion. And little evidence of serious attempts to divert or prevent what seems like a pre-ordained path. As we discuss, the underlying reasons for 'poor' or difficult behaviour do not seem to be considered – the behaviour system appears to suppress conduct rather than address root causes.

- It also seems that systems and teacher decisions on discipline do prevail over more caring responses, which is often a reflection of the wider educational system and huge pressure on staff.

Experiences of Exclusion

- Permanent exclusion has its roots in a significant history of behavioural breakdowns usually preceded by almost intolerable pressure felt by the interviewees because of long-term bullying, and in some cases, lengthy internal isolation. There is a major crisis – a particularly shocking incident – leading to immediate exclusion later confirmed as permanent.

- The voices of young people and their families are rarely heard. The exclusion process is not a consultative process apparently – teacher and governor decisions are final and parents and those excluded it seems know little or nothing about their rights of appeal or independent evaluation.

- A teacher or teachers enforce the rapid ejection from the premises and pupils leave believing they are on a fixed term exclusion.

- What seems common is that parents/guardians are invited to the school where the Head teacher and a colleague confirm the exclusion as no longer fixed but permanent. There is no appeal allowed – the decision is final; this is how it appears to students and family members.

- Subsequently, a meeting with Governors follows that rubber-stamps the teaching staff decision. The interviewees give various responses to these meetings suggesting that they were not given a fair hearing and that (from the interviewees) there is no right to appeal or at least no knowledge of this right conveyed to the interviewees or parents/guardians.

- Furthermore, the sense of unfairness is compounded when some interviewees/parents find that they have been removed to a PRU with no consultation or prior discussion.

Where To From Here: Some Recommendations

- Our research findings suggest a trauma-informed and therapeutic approach to education, offered by PRUs and some mainstream schools in Reading, could help prevent permanent exclusions. Fair hearings around behavioural incidences, spaces for listening, a flexible curriculum, specialist teachers with time to provide care and support, and a right to be heard really count.

- Leading from the above, schools can learn from the successful work of PRUs in terms of providing this therapeutic learning environment and embedding trauma-informed practice throughout the education system. There could be opportunities for shared learning and training for students and staff around issues relating to relationships, mental health, bullying, trauma and greater understanding of links between intersectionality, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, and belonging at school. Further equality, diversity and inclusion training for students and staff could be a positive step forward.

- We suggested in Section 3, that a child rights-based approach (UNCRC, 1999) can provide a useful lens through which to view the school exclusion process, particularly for exploring the rights of children and their families to be heard and consulted in life-changing decisions, and the use of isolation rooms in schools.

- As reflected in the methodology, this research sought only to voice the experiences of a small cohort of young people, and there is a need for further research that seeks to understand the experiences of more students, schools, teachers, and other stakeholders.

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APPENDIX - Interview Questions

Exploring the school journey

Can you tell us about your experience of going to school – from the beginning?

Were you happy at school? When were you happiest?

What was best about your school and what did you not like?

What subject(s) appealed most to you and is there a teacher or teachers who you really got on with?

Were friends important to you? You might have had a group of friends? How would you describe them – clever, sporty, loud, happy, caring…

Was there some event or some year when you felt that school wasn't helpful or wasn't a place you wanted to be?

Maybe some parts of school made you anxious or affected your confidence – what sort of things, SATs for example?

Did anybody help you at the time? What might have helped you to get on when things were difficult or troubling.

Having support is so important – what support did you have – where did it come from. If no support was offered to you, can you say why?

Did you ever feel that you were treated unfairly or unjustly? Did you feel that you were treated differently compared to others and if so, do you know why this might be?

Experience of education

We have explored some of your time in a school or schools. How would you sum up your experience of your education? Looking back what was it like? What's the biggest thing you've learnt about education?

Would you say your last school was a good school – what did the school offer you?

If education was a game – who are the winners and who are the losers?

Are you any clearer now about what you want to do with your life – what you want to be or where you want to go?

Looking to the future would you say you're on track or off-track – destination in mind or lost maybe?

Exploring the exclusion journey

Can you tell us the story of how you have ended up excluded

You have been permanently excluded – what does this mean to you, how do you feel about it?

A journey starts somewhere – where did exclusion begin for you? What was it or who was it that got you heading to permanent exclusion?

People sometimes say – 'if only it had been different or I wish I had done something about it' – do you have those thoughts?

Looking back how do you feel you were treated?

You have described your exclusion story – what meetings or conversations were most memorable to you?

What impact has this exclusion had on your family and your friends?

Where from here?

We were hoping you might offer some suggestions about how to make exclusion an easier or a helpful experience. Is there anything you want to say?

Is exclusion the right thing to do? What should be done in place of exclusion?

Are there any messages you want to pass on through this interview?

Would you be prepared to have a follow up interview? Would you be prepared to meet with our other interviewees to consider together some exclusion issues?

HearME

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