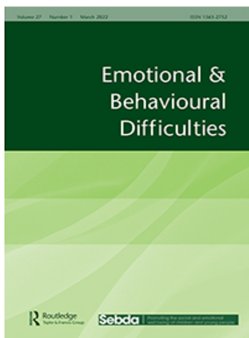

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rebd20

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To cite this article: Rick Murphy (2022) How children make sense of their permanent exclusion: a thematic analysis from semi-structured interviews, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 27:1, 43-57, DOI: 10.1080/13632752.2021.2012962

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2021.2012962

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Published online: 06 Dec 2021.

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EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES
2022, VOL. 27, NO. 1, 43–57
https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2021.2012962

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How children make sense of their permanent exclusion: a thematic analysis from semi-structured interviews

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ABSTRACT
A rising number of children are permanently excluded from school each year in England. Children's experiences of exclusion are underrepresented in the literature, effectively giving prominence to the views and interpretations of researchers. This qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews to explore the ways in which excluded children story their experience of school exclusion (N = 18). Thematic analysis was used to identify trends in the children's data, integrating key themes to develop an understanding of how children make sense of the exclusion situation. The main findings from this study are that excluded children tend to experience schools as misreading symptoms of social injustice, bullying, and special educational needs as misbehaviour and non-compliance. The children reported that exclusion behaviours were a communication of personal and social problems that were amplified by punitive school measures. Ways in which schools can implement these findings are discussed with key recommendations for employing these findings within schools and educational settings.

KEYWORDS
Children and young people; education; emotional and behavioural difficulties; exclusion; qualitative research

Introduction

The fact that some children can meet the requirements of a school education while others respond with resistance, disruption and withdrawal, requires some pause for reflection. The choice to behave challengingly towards teachers and school communities must in some sense be available to every child and, on an annual basis, around 8,000 children in England persistently make such a choice (Office for National Statistics, 2019). The nature of *personal* choice has been questioned by social scientists who describe individual acts as symbols of social contexts (Pearce 2007). That is, a child's challenging behaviour is formed within prohibiting contexts such as racial inequality, social inequality, and disability discrimination (Cole 2015; Rollock 2008).

England's Department for Education (DfE) has recognised that young people are excluded from school without the context for the exclusion or the children's experiences being considered (Graham et al. 2019). This creates a tendency in educational settings to remove contexts-of-disadvantage from exclusion situations (Office for National Statistics 2019; Russell 2016), recording and therefore defining individual behaviours as the exclusion issue, leading to misguided assumptions about why they occur (Lawrence 2011). Exclusions are recorded as stemming from acts of disruption, truancy, and violence without the social context for these actions being reflected on (Office for National Statistics 2019). But, given the academic and financial strain that exclusions put on school communities, why are schools and government bodies not recording exclusions within a social frame? Such an understanding would likely contribute to a reduction in school exclusions.

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Researchers have argued that school exclusion is not seen through the social lens because it is part of a historic practice of maintaining a selective educational status quo (Howarth 2004), developed out of largescale inequalities in British society (Cole 2015; Foucault 1977; Howarth 2004; Parker and Ford 2013). The narrative that forms around excluded children acts as a form of symbolic power over disadvantaged groups (Bourdieu 1991). The argument here is that school communities focus on individual student behaviours rather than teaching practices and social issues in order to misrepresent the behavioural effects of educational inequalities (Bagley and Hallam 2015). This non-conscious process affects the very structure of the school system such as in teacher training in which inadequate responses to the needs of disadvantaged children are part of policy decisions, with nearly half of newly qualified teachers' reporting being undertrained to consider social equality in their teaching (Ginnis et al. 2018). That is, individual teachers are trained into ignorance of social inequalities and they are trained to embody institutional values such as holding onto negative views of poor children, exacerbating tensions with families from minority backgrounds, and removing talk of social disadvantage from the exclusion process (Bagley and Hallam 2015). The school's gaze on the child distracts from central issues such as that many schools lack culturally-sensitive relationship building skills, inclusive teaching, and open communication with learning support services, or that multiple disadvantaged families experience teacher behaviours as instrumental to the exclusion itself (Daniels et al. 2003; Lawrence 2011; McDonald and Thomas 2003; Pirrie et al. 2011). One striking example of this is that children with speech and language difficulties are viewed primarily by teachers as having behavioural problems, and such views result in conflict with the child that leads to higher rates of exclusion from school (Clegg et al. 2009; Law and Sivyer 2003). It is expected then that qualitative interviews with parents show that schools act disproportionately judging towards children and families from disadvantaged groups (McDonald and Thomas 2003). The literature consistently cites the school's failure to provide adequate support as a significant factor in a child's exclusion (Woods 2008), and, if the young person's behaviour is labelled as the reason, or even the definition of the exclusion, in every recorded case, then the social injustices that are present in the overwhelming majority of school exclusions need to form part of the exclusion narrative (Rollock 2008; Wright, Standen, and Patel 2009).

Schools as extensions of government

It is critical to contextualise and not demonise schools. The school itself, much like the child with their behaviour, exists within a broader economy and culture (Bowen 2003; Pearce 2007; Smith, Aston, and Pyl 2012). The growth of mass-schooling in Western societies, for example, occurred alongside cultural changes such as capitalism and the rise of nationalism (Green 1990). One effect of these nationalistic changes was that schools gradually became the main socialising mechanism for Western societies (Deacon 2006). That is, from the 18th Century onwards, British and other Western governments developed systems of law and politics to ensure that schools achieve the moral, educational and social training of children (Bowen 2003): thus, schools embodied state inequalities from their inception. Foucault labelled this process the 'pedagogisation of children' and showed how the modern school system is an extension of government surveillance (Foucault 1986).

Systematic reviews that compare data from the UK (N = 3) and the USA (N = 33) have shown that many effective interventions at the level of the school tend to be short-term due to social inequality in the broader society (Valdebenito et al. 2018). In this way, wealthier areas produce more academic children not by revolutionary teaching practices but by filtering out social disadvantage in student populations (Gorard and Siddiqui 2018). Social disadvantage hierarchically organises children into catchment areas of particular school communities, and so poverty, racism, classism, and other social divisions become key cultural factors that entangle certain schools in cycles of exclusion beyond the awareness of most children (Smith, Aston, and Pyl 2012). When schools become a form of scrutiny

over children and families they inevitably act more punitively towards disadvantaged students and parents (Foucault 1986; Gazeley 2012). This leads to huge disparities in exclusions for underprivileged children (Cole 2015; Office for National Statistics 2019).

The effect of this structural issue on the ways in which children make sense of exclusion is not fully known, and so researching the experience of excluded students is therefore an attempt to empower them to add a personal account of the epistemology of school exclusions. While some research on the views of excluded children have been gathered (Daniels et al.'s 2003; Parker et al. 2016), no sense-making data has been found within the current literature. The available data demonstrates the socio-political issues embedded within school exclusions and this paper aims to add to this research by studying the qualitative ways in which children experience exclusion. That is, the central research question here is: Given the concealed background of social disadvantage in school exclusions, how do children make sense of their exclusion? Do they accept the behavioural definition given to them? What meaning do children make from the fact that their school placement was removed? Answering these questions is a step towards understanding the effects of social disadvantage on the ways that children experience education and aims to reveal some important linguistic and cognitive characteristics of educationally-disadvantaged children.

Study design

For this study, excluded students were interviewed in a semi-structured format. Interviews aimed to study the qualitative experience that students had of their exclusion process (Ferguson and Weber 2015). The study was carried out by a male researcher in the role of a systemic psychotherapist to five local authority pupil referral units. Being employed as a psychotherapist within the alternative education sites meant the researcher was familiar with the ways in which children voiced their experiences of exclusion. It was important to acknowledge this relationship because the young people and the researcher will have generated knowledge out of pre-understandings and shared assumptions (Braun and Clarke 2006). That is, how the children storied their exclusion experience will have been socially constructed within the context of a therapeutic relationship (Lavis 2010). Added to this, the social identity of the researcher, a white British heterosexual able-bodied middle-class professional male, of which each is a privileged identity within the pupil referral units (Cole 2015), may have shaped how the children responded to the research questions (Lavis 2010). The researcher's epistemological standpoint was that, by informing the children that their participation would contribute to educational knowledge, coupled with having trained in the use of semi-structured interviews, he could create a context in which the children would be given power to voice and define their experience without the researcher perturbing the data. However, knowledge developed out of this study must still be heard in terms of the personal and professional identity of the researcher and his therapeutic relationship with the children (Lavis 2010).

Data collection

18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual students between the ages of 6 and 16 from four Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in the South of England. The schools' headteacher and the local authority provided ethical consent for the study to go ahead, and purposive sampling (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to recruit participants whereby the researcher attended site assemblies to explain and advertise the study. Interested students completed a sign-up sheet to take part in the study. Parental consent was sought for each student. Consent included an overview of the research project, data storage, and information on the right to withdraw, in order to establish informed consent from participants and their guardians (BERA, 2018).

Sample

The inclusion criterion was that each participant had been permanently excluded from one or multiple schools. Data on age and gender were collected and recorded (Table 1), but data on ability, ethnicity and school were omitted because the population was small enough for these details to compromise confidentiality. More female participants volunteered for the study, despite more males being permanently excluded from school (Office for National Statistics 2019). This may be an effect of using an interview format because existing research shows that the language skills of excluded children are lower in males compared with females (Clegg et al. 2009). These considerations may have limited the study's capacity to make claims about gender, class, ability, race and ethnicity when interpreting the data. Existing quantitative data was used to consider these variables when examining the findings to ensure that these significant factors formed part of the analysis. The following table provides a breakdown of the participants (N = 18):

Interview questions

Interviews followed a restorative framework: this means that questions were conceptualised as open enquiries designed to help participants process and reflect on the conflicts that led to exclusion (Wachtell 1997). A restorative framework meant that the research process was viewed as a way of increasing the student's reflexivity around school exclusion (McNamee 1988) while simultaneously collecting data for analysis.

Questions were written with the aim of not discriminating against the developmental or biological age of each participant. Questions were formulated in simple language and each participant was given time to process each question, with the interviewer rephrasing, clarifying and checking understanding at each stage of the interview. The interview questions are provided in (Figure 1) below.

(1) When did things start to go wrong in school?
(2) What was happening at the time?
(3) Why do you think you were excluded?
(4) What helped you most in managing your exclusion?
(5) What was most unhelpful in managing your exclusion?
(6) What changed in your life after you were excluded? I.e. What impact did exclusion have on your life?

1) When did things start to go wrong in school?
2) What was happening at the time?
3) Why do you think you were excluded?
4) What helped you most in managing your exclusion?
5) What was most unhelpful in managing your exclusion?
6) What changed in your life after you were excluded? I.e. What impact did exclusion have on your life?

Figure 1. Interview schedule.

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Age (years)	6	7	8	10	13	14	15	16	Total
Male	1	1	0	0	0	4	2	0	*8*
Female	0	0	1	1	3	2	1	2	*10*
Total	1	1	1	1	3	6	3	2	*18*

Ethical considerations

To attend to issues of disclosure and mental health concerns, interviews were held between the student and myself, a psychotherapist with whom they had an established relationship. This limited the sample size but allowed me as the researcher to gain informed consent from each participant as well as ensuring that their mental health needs were met while the students participated in the interviews. Students who displayed signs of upset or distress during the interviews were asked if they would like to continue, take a break or stop the interview. All participants were offered additional time with a different qualified therapist after each interview to discuss any emotional or psychological issues that arose. All identifying information was removed from the original questionnaires to ensure adherence to the Data Protection Act (2018) and students were informed that they were participating in research that would be anonymised and made public. In presenting the findings, students were given pseudonyms to ensure their data was protected.

The study did not allow for voice or video recording due to data protection policies that prohibited transfer of confidential information outside of the schools. The method adopted to capture the voice of the child was to take extensive field notes and record verbatim quotes while checking the accuracy with each student. All students and their guardians consented to the inclusion of verbatim quotes in this study.

Coding and data analysis

Student data were categorised into themes following a thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data was taken to be qualitative in nature and based on a critical realist epistemology; that is, data was viewed as representations of the children's reality from which the researcher integrated key themes (Kuhn and Westwell 2012). Each piece of data was analysed at the explicit level by the researcher, staying close to the semantic quality of each child's words, meanings and utterances (Braun and Clarke 2006). Codes were linked into meaningful groups that formed the basis of thematic categories. The use of a single researcher, carrying out the interviews and data analysis, meant that the bias of the researcher needed to be addressed. This was addressed by providing the thematic categories to the students to test the accuracy and reliability of the data. Feedback from this data-check was incorporated into the final themes to ensure accuracy and rigour of the research findings.

Findings and analysis

When the data was analysed, three themes were identified across the dataset that were divided into eight subthemes. (Table 2) outlines the themes and subthemes:

Theme 1. personal problems

One significant finding was that students narrated the exclusion as linked to dealing with one or multiple personal problems. Their problems varied in four distinct ways, but the common experience was that the initial problem presented as a behavioural issue, leading the teacher and student to grapple with the behaviour rather than the underlying problem.

Table 2. Themes from the experiences of excluded children.

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Personal Problems	(a) Special Education Needs (b) Child Abuse (c) Bullying	Children reported multiple personal problems that were signalling distress in school.
The School's Response	(a) Misinterpreting the problem (b) Lack of Empathy (c) Lack of Quality Support	Children reported multiple responses to their personal problems that amplified the difficulties.
The Impact of the Exclusion	(a) Managing the Exclusion (b) Social Isolation, Mental Health and Academic Performance	Children reported issues with how the exclusion experience impacted their personal, social, emotional and educational wellbeing.

Special educational needs

A high proportion of students reported having a learning difficulty. Students were diagnosed with conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or an autistic spectrum condition and many had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan for special educational needs. Commonly, those with a learning difficulty interpreted the school as boring rather than challenging, 'I got bored, I started to mess about and argue with the teacher' (Jack, 14). This indicates that the disability was not experienced as the central concern, the problem was experienced within the teaching rather than their ability to learn (Clegg et al. 2009). This is significant because the record shows that the individual child is named as responsible for the exclusion (Office for National Statistics 2019), yet many with a diagnosed learning disability made the connection between the behaviour they showed and the school's lack of sensitivity towards their needs: 'School was rubbish. There was too much work and I stopped going in as it was difficult' (Jess, 14). This shows the circularity involved in how some children make sense of their exclusion, in that the school is factored into or even thought of as the cause of their exclusion.

One important finding was that a fear of being thought 'stupid' prevented many children from recognising and signalling their learning need, even when they had a diagnosis. Storying school as 'boring' rather than 'too difficult' might illustrate how the punitive social experience of being 'stupid' might outweigh the experience of being excluded. This became apparent when Jack spontaneously interrupted one of the interviews. Jess (14), who was being interviewed, was struggling to read a question out loud and Jack asked if she was 'stupid'. Her response was to stop reading and refuse to continue. Jack was supported to leave with a teacher who later mentioned that his reading age was below Jess's and that he may have ridiculed her to hide his embarrassment. The researcher noted that Jess was comfortable reading slowly prior to being affronted by her peer. This highlighted the importance of the peer-group in how the child evaluates themselves connected to beliefs about abilities in education (Bronfenbrenner 2004).

Another boy, Oliver (15), recalled that he was offered a support worker for his learning needs. He felt embarrassed by this and eventually truanted from class, and these examples were numerous. For example, Samuel (14) reported that when he was identified as needing extra support, he was 'made to sit with autistic kids'. He felt uncomfortable because he thought his peers would judge him. These findings indicate that highlighting a learning need can be more disruptive for a child than the learning need itself. That is, a learning need exists in a wider social context of disability discrimination that must be considered if teachers are to intervene effectively in the child's education (Bagley and Hallam 2015).

Many of the examples from the thematic analysis highlighted issues with academic ability, processing and comprehension. Students who were diagnosed with ADHD reported that the learning-need was not specific to processing information but to physical engagement with the subject; a regulatory need to move around, fiddle, play and talk. Jack (14), who has an ADHD diagnosis, discussed that he felt 'pressure' build up when he had to sit still in class. While completing his interview, he played with magic sand. He was asked, 'how would this conversation be if you were not playing with sand?' He said he would lose focus and walk out of the room, like he usually does in 'boring' lessons.

Existing quantitative research shows that children with a special educational need are seven times more likely to become permanently excluded from school (Office for National Statistics 2019). The findings in this section highlight that the learning need needs to be met without the student 'losing face' in front of a peer group, yet, where a student has an attention deficit disorder, the stigma might be less impactful than individual factors such as a need for constant stimulation (Cole 2015).

Abuse

Not all students presented with a learning difficulty. One significant finding was that most students reported being physically or emotionally abused in the recent or historic past, and that the abuse manifested as behavioural problems. For example, Abi, an 8-year-old girl, recalled that her mother, 'tried making me do naughty things when she was on drugs' and she was excluded from school for repeatedly refusing to follow adult instructions. Many of the children grew tearful in the interview when they discussed witnessing domestic violence and other forms of abuse and were either living in care or had a history with social services, a fact that matches previously reported quantitative data (Cole 2015).

The abuse had a significant impact on the students' emotional wellbeing and engagement with school. Elijah (14) said, 'As soon as I got to school, I got excluded after three hours for getting into a fight'. It was clear from the interviews that the students did not always link their abuse to their angry or violent behaviour, 'I kept getting angry, and getting into fights, but I didn't know why': this statement was also taken from Elijah, a 14-year-old boy who was in foster care, and he was repeatedly abused in his family home. Violence or externalising behaviours, which are outward behaviours that express inner feelings, are instrumental in communication issues with domestic abuse victims (Parker et al. 2016). One student, Ella, a 16-year-old victim of domestic abuse, began to make links during the interview, 'I think it's because I wasn't getting the help. My anger got worse and I took it out on the teachers'. Similarly to children with a learning disability, many students storied the classroom behaviour as an outcome, in fact a causal link, of being unsupported with substantial difficulties.

These findings match those of the quantitative research that show that excluded children are more likely to have suffered abuse (SEU, 2003). While students were embarrassed when discussing learning needs, abused children were boastful when discussing violence, indicating that 'stupidity' carries a social stigma where a willingness for violence does not. It may also communicate how abused children tend to use destructive forms of power in environments where they feel most safe (Thakkar and McCanne 2000): 'In school, I used to go crazy at people. If people got in my way, I would punch them and still would now'; this is from Paige, a 14-year-old girl who lives in a residential children's home after having suffered domestic abuse. Students who reported abuse in this study discussed multiple mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and anger issues that stemmed from the abuse and led to disruptive behaviours in the classroom.

Bullying

All students reported having experienced personal problems and most students discussed that they were bullied because of their difficulties, reporting that being bullied turned a difficulty into a crisis. Although this paper views gender as a spectrum, and does not support a binary view of gender, only girls and boys self-identified in this study, creating an opportunity for linguistic comparisons. One insightful comparison was that girls tended to use the word 'bully' where boys tended to use phrases such as 'wind me up' or 'start on me', indicating a difference in male and female discourse around victimisation within the context of cultural gender ideals (Stein, Leventhal, and Trabasso 1990; Valdebenito et al. 2018).

The bullying took mostly verbal forms that incited aggressive or withdrawing behaviour from the children. For example, Poppy, a 16-year-old girl, discussed her father recently dying from cancer. Her friends reacted negatively and began to isolate her from the group. In the first few weeks her peers began to laugh at her and make fun of the way her father died. Poppy described that her peers made fake accounts on Facebook and sent her hurtful messages about her father's death. She described being in shock from the bereavement but traumatised from the bullying. Her permanent exclusion was for throwing a chair across the room at one of the bullies.

Nathan, a 15-year-old-boy, discussed being emotionally abused and starved by his step-dad, who was subsequently removed from the home by the police and children's services. He remembered developing a desperation for food and putting on a significant amount of weight when the perpetrator left his family home. Nathan's peers taunted him for being 'skinny' from neglect and then for being 'fat' for having put on weight. Though the abuse was traumatic, it was the bullying that he felt made him violent and disruptive in class, and he was permanently excluded for fighting with someone who had mocked his physical appearance.

All students recounted problems around the time of their exclusion and bullying or peer judgment was identified as a significant factor in transforming a problem into something bigger. Social theorists suggest that peer influence is the most significant factor in a young person's development during adolescence (Gergen and Gill 2020) which is consistent with the finding that, while the children all faced problems, the exclusion-behaviour is repeatedly linked to how their personal problem stood out in the social context.

Theme 2. The school's response

A key finding in this study was that most students labelled responses from schools as negative turning points in their permanent exclusion. It is possible that interviews consisted of higher proportions of schools that 'got it wrong', and as such schools may be better at responding to student needs generally, but what is clear from this research is that permanently excluded students experience inadequate support from mainstream schools once a problem is identified.

Misinterpreting the problem

The first common issue that most students experienced was that schools misinterpreted the signs of abuse, ill-mental-health, learning difficulties and bullying. 'They thought I was trying to show off. My head of year told me I was trying to show off.' 'The teacher blamed me and didn't listen.' 'My teacher didn't understand there was a deeper problem. He kept me in classes with the people who bullied me. When I got angry, I got put in isolation.' These are all quotes from Jess, Abi and Keira who were victims of bullying around the time of their exclusion.

Teachers tended to view the emotional effects of abuse and family problems as intrinsic to the child and not a way of coping: 'They saw anger not frustration' (Becky, 13). 'I got labelled as a bad kid' (Oliver, 15). 'I got into trouble but didn't get help' (Abi, 8). Most students reported that teachers did not notice their problem and so their behaviour was seen to be the result of being a 'bad kid'. This finding was true of children with ADHD, learning difficulties, mental health problems, and children who had been abused or bullied; school staff-members did not understand that anger, anxiety, depression, defiance, and truancy signalled, in Ella's words, a 'deeper problem'. This is consistent with research that demonstrates a lack of teacher training in understanding the needs of vulnerable children (Ginnis et al. 2018). A common effect of this was that some children interpreted misunderstandings as evidence that teachers disliked them, compounding the tension they already had with the school. These findings suggest that seeing the child as faulty is viewing the problem out-of-context and damages the relationship between the school and child (Woods 2008).

Lack of empathy

Most students reported that the school tended to respond with low empathy, blame and judgement towards them. For example, teachers were experienced as downplaying bullying and tending towards the idea that bullying stops of its own accord. 'The teacher told me not to listen [to the bullies] and told me just to ignore them. I was being bullied, this girl kept calling me a fat slag . . . she kept pushing me and ran away . . . I told the teacher and she said to go and play, even when I was crying'. This comment was from Keira, a 10-year-old girl, and was replicated in six other statements from different children. For example, Maddy, a 13-year-old-girl, who began to cry during the interview, discussed that she had talked to a teacher about being bullied and was given the advice to ignore the bully and not to take the comments and threats seriously. She was later assaulted by the bully.

Another student, Paige (14), reported being threatened with a knife by someone in her class. She disclosed the incident to the school but was told that she had to remain in the same class. She remembered telling her father that she would get excluded on purpose or refuse to go in. Paige was offered counselling but said the counselling never started and she was eventually permanently excluded for repeatedly truanting. She expressed that the lack of empathy or 'care' from the teachers about her situation made her feel that the school disliked her.

The data consistently showed that students felt that they were not listened to, cared about or understood by the school and that this was integral to their exclusion: 'They were not helpful, didn't give me a chance to do better, they just kicked me out.' 'They didn't listen to me.' 'There were two meetings [about the exclusion] but I wasn't invited to them'. 'They should have more sympathy'. These were all quotes from students who were bullied and had significant personal difficulties affecting their mental health.

Lack of quality support

The data showed that when personal issues were identified in schools, the quality or type of support was experienced as poor or unhelpful. The children criticised support from services internal and external to the school, including therapy, social work, academic, and behavioural interventions. A consistent finding was that excluded students felt under-supported and stigmatised.

Some participants discussed that when they did engage with support that it had adverse effects on their mental health when there was a sense of blame or lack of empathy from the professional. Children repeatedly discussed poor-quality support as causing their violent and truanting behaviour. For example, Poppy (16), who described herself as having an eating disorder after suffering a bereavement and bullying, said that she was given support in school through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Poppy described the process of therapy as enhancing her anxiety because it was blaming towards her mother, and she felt blamed for the eating disorder. Another female student reported the same experience, that her CAMHS sessions raised her anxiety by blaming her mother. One student, Samuel (14), with learning difficulties said he was offered an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) but that they met only one time for the supporting adult to give him a book that he did not read. Samuel felt the worker did not care for him or understand him in a meaningful way. The students tended to identify that they needed support but that they were either unable to access it or found it lacking in understanding. Nathan (15) reported that he was offered counselling at age 8 but did not receive it until he was 14 and said, 'I could have been in mainstream if people had helped me with my anger . . . Got anger management after it all and it was too late. I got angry with my anger management counsellor and I refused to see him'. Nathan is the same boy who was abused by his step-dad, bullied about his weight and permanently excluded for being violent. He felt that therapy was addressing his behaviour and not the circumstances that gave rise to his behaviour. The delay in supportive interventions was frequently given as a reason for the emergence of behavioural problems.

The research shows that excluded children tend to have lower emotional vocabulary and as such are less able to recognise and articulate emotional and academic problems (Parker and Ford 2013). What is clear from this research is that schools can misread distress as disruption, and use punitive measures to curtail behaviour, which conveys to the child a signal of judgment and blame. Oliver (15) said he was offered a behaviour support worker in class but found it embarrassing, which enhanced his initial difficulty and he began to truant. He was then permanently excluded.

Most students who reported having a positive relationship with a member of staff discussed this as having a positive effect on their behaviour in school. This is consistent with research that shows how relationships are important variables in student outcomes (Lawrence 2011). One important finding was that many students felt their trusted adult was undermined by the school, as one student, Ella (16), discussed, 'The isolation teachers are isolated'. She meant that the staff member with whom she had a good relationship was not listened to or respected by the school. Elijah (14) said, 'If the isolation teacher was in my meeting I wouldn't have got kicked out'. The data showed that understanding and caring adults tended to be experienced by the children as helpful for their wellbeing but conflictual towards school relationships because such adults were not respected by school hierarchies. This may indicate that misunderstanding signs of social injustice serves a regulatory function within the school system (Law and Sivyer 2003).

Theme 3. The impact of the exclusion

Once exclusion occurs there are significant effects on the child's social and emotional health (Parker and Ford 2013). The findings in this study showed that the exclusion impacted the learning, social, educational, emotional and familial development of each child. The themes identified in this section demonstrate how the exclusion is an exclusion from a specific school but also an exclusion from support, resources, social networks and other important aspects of the child's development. That is, school exclusion was shown to be an exacerbator of the social factors that contribute to school exclusion (Cole 2015).

Managing the exclusion

The data showed that most students reported having had a positive transition from mainstream school to the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Students were positive about the practicalities of getting to the new school: 'School helped me by going to visit [the PRU] with an adult who was friendly' (Louis, 7). Students were equally positive about the emotional support, 'School helped understand what was difficult [about being excluded] and how to move on', 'School [PRU] helped me to talk about my feelings and make some friends', 'School managed my anxiety by doing the right timetable.' These findings were consistent with research that shows how PRUs tend to perceive the children's problems in the appropriate context of social disadvantage (Parker et al. 2016).

The time gap between mainstream school and the PRU tended to be the main issue experienced by these children. Many of the students felt ignored by their mainstream school, consistent with research findings (McDonald and Thomas 2003). A minority of students, who were all male, found the time gap to be 'relaxing', 'better because there was less rules. I got shouted at less', but overall, the students found the time between schools frustrating and difficult to manage. 'I didn't know where you go after you get excluded . . . There should be information about PRUs in a leaflet or something'. Most students reported that, in the time gap between schools, they were bored through a lack of homework, and homework tended to have a symbolic attachment to being enrolled in the mainstream school. The method used for gathering this data was the question, 'What was most unhelpful or difficult in managing your transition?'. The open question does not lead the participant to a particular theme and therefore the fact that most excluded students were frustrated by a lack of homework is significant.

Most children reported that exclusion was ineffective in shifting their behaviour: 'Exclusion is a holiday' (Maddy, 13) and 'I just got time off' (Elijah, 14). This indicates that the ineffectiveness arises when the discipline is aimed at reducing disruptive behaviour that stems from a 'deeper problem' (Ella, 16). This can be seen in comments such as, 'They didn't listen to my needs' (Samuel, 14) and with other data extracts such as, 'They didn't give me a chance, they just kicked me out' (Kiera, 10). In this example, Kiera reported that she was off school for five weeks and that her reading level dropped.

Social isolation, anxiety and academic performance

The biggest impact of permanent exclusion was in a student's social relationships. The word 'exclusion' tends to imply 'from school', but this study found that students are equally excluded from important social networks. Even in the age of social media, all students but one reported being isolated from their peer groups after their permanent exclusion; an impact that, for most, has continued to the present day. The data showed a worrying trend, that young people tended to be alone for most evenings and weekends and described their lives as 'boring' or 'lonely'. Even students who found the free time to be 'relaxing' or 'time for Xbox' reported being lonely, feeling unhappy and stressed about not having friends.

Social anxiety was linked to the isolation these students experienced after their exclusion. Maddy (13) said the impact of being excluded meant she had 'no friends, social anxiety' and 'cried a lot about going back to school'. Jess (14) said that she is angrier after her exclusion because now 'everyone makes a big issue and says I've got problems.' Becky (13) went on to say that, 'Being around PRU people made me worse, your behaviour gets worse.' Libby, also 13, said, 'it's a big deal … I have more anger and get into more fights with family and friends'. No boys reported increased mental health concerns, which may indicate that exclusions negatively impact girls more than boys. Equally, this could indicate that girls are more reflective or attuned to their mental health or that boys hide or do not recognise this impact (Cole 2015; Parker and Ford 2013).

Girls were significantly more anxious about the impact on their academic abilities of being in a PRU. 'PRUs are too easy. You can't pass all your GCSEs here … I'm worried about my future.' (Paige, 14). Ella (16) put it more forthrightly: 'I fucked up. I've lost hope in getting somewhere'. This may indicate a social pressure applied more to girls than to boys for achieving in education (Rollock 2008). Keira (10) discussed, 'dad thinks I can't read as well', where Poppy (16) discussed that her mother was concerned that, 'I'm behind in my work'. Becky (13) said that her father's work was affected because he had to supervise her, making him stressed and worried about her 'record' and being 'labelled as a bad kid'. Many data extracts that linked to anxiety showed the principal concern to be how the label of exclusion will affect the child as they grow into adults.

Discussion

The findings in this study show that children experience exclusion through the lens of multiple personal problems such as abuse, bullying, mental health difficulties, and special educational needs. Children storied exclusions as occurring when schools misinterpret signs of personal problems as misbehaviour and disruptiveness, leading to punitive educational practices that escalate smaller problems into significant and persistent disruptive behaviours. This paper has theorised that schools non-consciously support the national government to maintain symbolic power by removing social disadvantage from reports on exclusions, and, one effect of this, is that students appear to lack an insight into the link between their disruptive behaviour and their social disadvantages.

The hidden aspect of power and influence that social contexts have over children mean that excluded children are not aware of how structural problems such as institutional racism, ableism, and classism feed into the behaviours they exhibit. In this study, for example, none of the children mentioned poverty or disability discrimination though the majority of the children were below the

poverty line, and many had a diagnosed special educational need, consistent with research that shows that poor children are four times more likely to be excluded and those with a special educational need are seven times more likely to be excluded (Office for National Statistics 2019). Instead, children understand the problem of exclusion through the peer context, the school's lack of empathy or understanding, the class's lack of stimulation and the teacher's poor response to bullying. This implies that the effects of social disadvantage are hidden from children's immediate awareness and became recognised in their language use as, not social disadvantage, but the *effects* of social disadvantage. That is, the bullying, abuse, lower academic achievements, and other personal problems that they felt led to their exclusion are shown to stem majorly from social inequality (Cole 2015).

This study has shown that there is a consistent picture from the existing quantitative data that social disadvantage is the driver of school exclusions and the effects of social disadvantage, such as abuse and lower academic performance, are how children make sense out of the exclusion. None of the children directly took responsibility for the exclusion, suggesting an experiential or embodied understanding, if not conscious, of the social disadvantages they face. Undoubtedly, school exclusions are not **only** but are **mostly** an issue of social disadvantage and so educationalists and government representatives are encouraged to consider the recommendations that develop from this research as pertinent mostly to issues of social disadvantage.

Recommendations

This study has brought together three recommendations related to the hierarchical levels of social organisation identified by Bronfenbrenner in 2004. These levels start with the individual (known as the student), then the community around the individual (known as the school or Microsystem) and then the society beyond the community (known as the government or Macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner 2004). These levels are considered mutually influential but with the power to influence being stronger towards the peak of the hierarchy (Pearce 2007).

(1) The Individual

The findings from this study indicate that, at the individual level, children need additional support to voice their personal problems, particularly in relation to bullying, learning difficulties, mental health and abuse. School students need to be supported to develop social skills in signalling these concerns to professionals within the school system and to become more aware of how these problems link to exclusion behaviours. When children begin to show truancy, aggression, disruption and inattention, they need opportunities outside of the classroom to discuss their emotions and experiences so that serious issues are not missed or misunderstood. The findings in this study suggest that if children were better able to signal their personal problems, and better able to recognise their disruptive behaviour within a social context, their exclusion behaviours may reduce.

(2) The Microsystem

The social context that compounds exclusions needs to be factored into teaching and school practices, where educators and school staff are taught to recognise that a lack of emotional signalling in children is often a communication of social disadvantage. Teachers and staff members should receive additional training and supervision that focuses on empathy and understanding of exclusion behaviours, as well as on practical ways for supporting young people to voice their personal problems. The findings in this study suggest that if schools increase their empathy and responsiveness to bullying and social disadvantage, they may reduce exclusions. Equally, schools should create ways to record social disadvantage within the exclusion process.

(3) The Macrosystem

While the UK government does protect some aspects of social disadvantage from discrimination, such as race and ability via the Equality Act 2010, the government should consider how exclusion policy in England continues to discriminate against many disadvantaged children. The findings in this study indicate that a wider range of social disadvantages such as poverty and bullying need to be included as part of exclusion policy, such that governments take more accountability for the exclusion behaviours of children. Further research is needed to consider how at the level of culture, particularly in England, there persists a systemic misreading of the signs and symptoms of social disadvantage and bullying that lead to practices of permanent exclusion. The outcomes of such research could point the way for how to build more equality within the educational system in England and the UK.

Conclusion

This study has shown that excluded students bring multiple social and educational inequalities into the school environment. These inequalities are hidden beneath layers of challenging behaviour that need to be interpreted sensitively or they can leave schools, parents and children grappling with symptoms of problems rather than with problems themselves. This research has created the hypothesis that school exclusions can be reduced by increasing social equality and by increasing emotional-signalling in students. It goes further to suggest that lower emotional signalling in excluded students may be an effect of social inequality visible only in the actions of the child. Further research is required to test this hypothesis in school environments, particularly environments of high deprivation and social disadvantage as well as those catering for special educational needs. The study's small sample size (N = 18) highlights the need to replicate this research in other areas of England and the UK and to include more male participants in future works.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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