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Psychosocial disorder or rational action? Contrasting professional and pupil narratives of school exclusion

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ABSTRACT


Over the last five years, the Excluded Lives team has been examining the patterns and processes of school exclusions across the UK in order to identify those factors which may exacerbate or reduce exclusions. One of the most striking aspects is the contrasting accounts of the causes of exclusion provided by professionals and pupils. Drawing on interview data from 29 school-based professionals and 16 excluded pupils in Wales, the paper analyses the different discourses which underpin their respective narratives. Professional accounts draw on discourses of vulnerability – seeing their pupils' behaviour as symptomatic of some underlying malaise, typically as victims of adverse socio-economic and familial circumstances. Pupils' accounts, on the other hand, are not about underlying 'causes', but about the specific circumstances of the 'offence'. In their accounts, they are neither vulnerable nor victims. Indeed, they present their actions as rational – sometimes even heroic – responses to their situation. In drawing out this contrast, the paper does not seek to privilege one type of narrative over another – for both contain 'truths'. However, it concludes that the hierarchy of credibility might need to be rebalanced in favour of the pupil if pupil-professional dialogue is to progress and trust be fostered.

KEYWORDS

School exclusion;
psychosocial disorder;
therapy culture; victim;
pupil voice

Introduction

Over the last few years, the Excluded Lives team has been gathering data on school exclusions from across the four nations of the UK in order to understand how the countries' different education policy regimes contribute to varying levels of school exclusion (see Tseliou et al., 2023). We have found clear differences in the political discourse of the four nations (McCluskey et al., 2024), as well as the level and diversity of alternative provision (Power et al., 2024). These differences appear to have a bearing on the options that are available to professionals as they attempt to deal with the 'wicked problem' (Armstrong, 2021) of disruptive pupil behaviour. However, while there are contrasts in education policy and provision in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, there are strong similarities across the four nations in the professional discourse surrounding exclusion. There appears to be a shared professional

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understanding of the likely causes of those behaviours that lead pupils to be excluded from school – an understanding that is informed by psychosocial explanations. However, this professional understanding stands in stark contrast to the pupils' own understanding of the causes of their exclusion. It is this disjuncture we explore in this paper, because we believe it has important implications for exacerbating the conflict and mistrust between teachers and pupils. We explore the disjuncture through comparing the accounts of the circumstances leading up to school exclusions as provided to us by teachers when discussing pupils who have been excluded, or are deemed at risk of exclusion, with the accounts provided by pupils who have themselves been excluded.

There are only a few empirical studies which focus on young people's narratives of their exclusion. These include Hayden and Ward's (1996) interviews with 22 primary school children in England who had been excluded. More recently, Feingold and Rowley (2022) recount the exclusion experiences of two primary school pupils in England. At secondary school level, again in England, Brede et al. (2017) explore the narratives of nine excluded students diagnosed with autism. Caslin (2021) analyses the case histories of 13 pupils diagnosed as suffering from social and emotional behavioural disorders who had experienced school exclusion. From Scotland, Munn and Lloyd (2005) interviewed over 60 young people who had been excluded from school in a variety of settings. There is also a small amount of survey data on the experiences of excluded children (e.g. Fazel & Newby, 2021).

Despite the diversity of method, of age range, and of national context, these studies all indicate that the majority of pupils who have been excluded perceive their sanction negatively. The children and young people reported that staff were 'unfair' and 'unhelpful' (Brede et al., 2017, p. 7), that they were 'unfairly blamed' (Hayden & Ward, 1996, p. 264), that teachers displayed a 'lack of consistency' and 'unreasonableness' (Munn & Lloyd, 2005, p. 216). These very negative accounts of teachers' behaviour are hard to reconcile with the many accounts of professional commitment promoting the wellbeing of pupils and putting in place strategies to prevent school exclusion, both in schools (e.g. Garza et al., 2014) and in alternative provision (e.g. Malcolm, 2020) – as well as the accounts of the teachers in our own research which we present in this paper.

In order to understand this apparent gulf between teachers' perspectives and the accounts of pupils who have been excluded, we draw on Foucault's (1977) concept of 'regimes of truth' and Becker's (1967) 'hierarchy of credibility'. Although Foucault uses the concept of 'regime of truth' to refer to the ways in which a society constructs, regulates, distributes, and circulates discourses (especially scientific discourses) as fundamental 'truths', the concept has relevance for understanding specialist fields of knowledge, such as education practitioner knowledge. Bekerman and Zembylas (2017) explore the growth of a psychologised language that they argue is dominant within the education profession. This 'regime of truth' leads teachers to make assumptions about what is 'inside' pupils. Additionally, the extensive use of terms such as 'trauma' and 'vulnerability' to account for pupil behaviour provides clear evidence of what Haslam (2016) calls 'concept creep', whereby terms referring to very negative aspects of human experience have expanded their meanings to encompass a much wider range of circumstances. Pupils have not been socialised into this professional regime of truth, but they have alternative understandings of what the 'truth' of the matter is – a truth which is less likely

to draw on the psychologised languages of what is 'inside' them, but which derives from how they perceive events 'out there' in the school.

The different 'regimes of truth' have different degrees of 'capture' because of the power imbalance within the school between the pupil and the professional. It is inevitable that there is a hierarchy of credibility. In his seminal paper *Whose side are we on?*, Becker (1967) discusses the challenges involved in evaluating the very different perspectives of participants in organisations where there is a hierarchical ranking of different groups. In schools, professionals are the superordinate group and pupils, and especially those at risk of exclusion, the subordinate members. Becker argues that we need to present the voice of the subordinate members, not necessarily because it is the 'truth', but because it is heard less often. It is not only that the pupil's voice is heard less often because it is more difficult to extract, but because it is more likely to be seen as 'suspect'. For example, when discussing the findings of their research on exclusion, Brede et al. (2017, p. 14) ask the reader to treat the excluded pupils' accounts 'with caution' as they are 'retrospective' and derived from pupils and parents only rather than the schools.

Of relevance here is Agnew's (1990, p. 268) analysis of young offenders' accounts. He argues that one reason their accounts are often discounted is because the offender may deliberately distort their explanation in order to make their actions appear justified. Another reason is that the young offender may be unaware of the 'true' causes of their actions, especially when these arise from psychological or social circumstances that predispose them to particular behaviours. However, Agnew's analysis of a large corpus of data containing offender accounts from US surveys has led him to propose that we *should* take offenders' accounts seriously – that in many cases their explanations are valid, and not subject to distortion or lack of awareness. If we are to apply his analysis to pupil narratives, we may want to view the actions that lead up to a pupils' exclusion as 'rational' and take their explanations at face value. It is the different degrees of validity that we give to competing explanations of pupils' actions that we explore here.

The research

In this paper we draw upon a series of interviews conducted in three local authorities in South Wales as part of the ESRC-funded project, *Excluded Lives: The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences*.¹ We interviewed professionals in each of these local authorities and in six case-study secondary schools (including one alternative education provider). The school-based staff include five headteachers, 12 classroom teachers and 12 staff with designated responsibilities for wellbeing, safeguarding and additional learning needs. The headteachers and classroom teachers were asked a series of questions about their strategies for dealing with pupils whose behaviour put them at-risk of being excluded. In order to understand some of the background to exclusion in more detail, and provide data on specific incidences of school exclusion, we asked the 12 teachers with designated pastoral responsibilities to identify and discuss a number of pupils (three in each school) who were at risk of being excluded, many of whom had already received several periods of fixed-term exclusion. It is these case histories in particular that we draw on heavily in this paper.

We had originally hoped to interview pupils who had been excluded from these same case study schools. However, for a number of reasons, this proved to be possible

in only two of the case study schools (referred to here as Bridgeport Secondary and Hill Crest High), where we were able to interview seven current pupils who had received fixed-term exclusions. In order to capture a larger number of 'excluee' narratives, we then invited participants from alternative education provision and youth settings. While the lack of connection between the 'excluee' and their school means we have been unable to triangulate different versions of a specific incidence of exclusion, it has had the advantage of yielding accounts that were not constrained by concerns about confidentiality or consequence on the part of either the pupil or the professional. With hindsight, triangulation would have been an impossible task because the professional and pupil perspectives draw on very different languages of description and discourses of 'truth'.

Through widening our search for excluded pupils beyond the case study schools, we were able to interview a total of 16 excluded pupils (three girls and 13 boys) aged between 14 and 17 years old, of whom 8 had been permanently excluded from school or alternative provision. Some were interviewed together (in groups of four) and some were interviewed individually. They were asked a series of questions about their relationship with their school and their aspirations, as well as the background to their school exclusion. All the interviews were conducted in English and transcribed. Although we have removed any identifying details and used pseudonyms for schools and individuals throughout, the extracts of data reported here use the interviewees' original words and contain 'strong' and, at times, offensive language.

The analysis entailed thematic coding of the interview data in order to draw out the dominant rationales and languages of description within the professional and pupil analysis. The thematic coding was informed by a range of sociological theories, especially those concerned with the rise of 'concept creep' (e.g. Haslam, 2016) and the rise of 'therapy culture' (Brown, 2015; Ecclestone, 2018, 2017; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2004).

In the following section, we present the professional accounts of how it is that pupils come to be at risk of exclusion from school. We then present the narratives of exclusion provided by excluded pupils themselves. The pupil narratives paint a very different picture which stands at odds with the professional accounts. Professional and pupil accounts seem to draw on two very different 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1977). In the concluding section, we discuss the issue of 'whose side we are on' (Becker, 1967) and argue that the hierarchy of credibility may need to be rebalanced in the pupil's favour.

Professional narratives

Analysis of professional accounts of the circumstances that lead to school exclusion, or put pupils at risk of exclusion, reveals that they are underpinned by some key tenets. The first is that a pupil's behaviour is symptomatic of something else. Secondly, the symptoms need to be interpreted in order to reach a diagnosis. Thirdly, that diagnosis will draw on a range of psychological conditions, especially those of neurodivergence, vulnerability and trauma, conditions that are then often linked back to dysfunctional domestic circumstances, and especially adverse child experiences (ACEs). In short, from the professional perspective, we need to understand pupils whose behaviour cannot be accommodated within the school setting as victims of psychosocial disorders.

Symptoms, diagnoses, vulnerability and trauma

One of the very clear findings is that teachers see a pupil's disruptive behaviour as a surface manifestation of something else – as a symptom of some underlying disturbance. The specific incidents that lead to a school exclusion appear to be less important in themselves than what they may reveal about the inner life of the pupil. The following teacher defines pupil behaviour as a form of communication:

Behaviour is always a form of communication, of those other things that are going on in the children's lives. And actually, if we understand those other things, then we learn to understand and manage the behaviours better. [Teacher, Hill Crest High]

Understanding what the pupil is trying to communicate requires understanding the 'other things' that are going on in their lives, and especially what is 'going on' at home. As the headteacher of St Mary's notes of his wellbeing support officer:

She's really good at knowing the children, knowing the families, knowing the make-up of the child.

The headteacher of Sacred Heart High School also emphasises the importance of seeing pupil behaviour in the wider context:

I think we try and see the whole youngster here, with all the challenges and things they have to deal with, rather than just the behaviour, you know, and understanding that the behaviour comes from who they are sometimes, and their frustrations with dealing with that.

The task of the professional is to 'read' the symptoms and reach a diagnosis based on information gathered through a series of questions. As Foucault (1975, pp. 8–9) discusses in 'The Birth of the Clinic', medical diagnosis entails a process which requires the 'expert' to 'abstract the patient' in order to 'know the truth of the pathological fact'. As Maynard and Turowetz (2019) argue, this process of abstraction and the 'reading' of the subject is particularly evident in the diagnoses of conditions such as autism.

Autism, or ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), figures frequently in our professionals' accounts – along with an array of acronyms for neurological disorders – such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and ODD (Oppositional Defiance Disorder). Schools now have access to a range of diagnostic tools through which they can 'read' the symptoms. The teacher at Hill Crest High describes how each pupil is given a profile which details any underlying conditions:

We then added this area, additional support strategies, which means these come from recommendations of things like Boxall profiles, or emotional assessment or an observational checklist or all these other sorts of questionnaires that we might find out. And actually, we work out that this child might have an attachment issue, they might have a trauma background, they might be lacking in organisational skills. So, we add those strategies on so that we know how to help the children. These are then available for all staff to read. [Teacher, Hill Crest High]

The presence of neurological conditions is almost always associated by the teachers with events in the pupils' background – often referred to in shorthand as 'ACEs' (Adverse Childhood Experiences). The term 'ACE' appeared in the last fifteen years (Kalmakis & Chandler, 2015) to refer to a stressful experience in the early life of the child and has since gained widespread currency as an important explanation for subsequent behavioural

disorders (e.g. Trinidad, 2021). The concept of ACEs certainly appears frequently in our teacher narratives, for example:

You're probably looking at least four ACEs. Well over, well over 50%, I'd probably say four ACEs [account] for about 70%, it's always a difficult one to record. Because how do you record emotional neglect and things? ... There's easy wins to record, like separation – that's most of our kids. Parent incarcerated – that's a high, high percentage. Domestic violence is high. Mental health problems in the home is high. Alcohol and drug problems are high in the home as well. [Head, Westbury]

The prevalence of psychosocial disorders triggered by ACEs is seen to be particularly high in areas of deprivation, for example:

We talked about ACEs and understanding what that means really, all it means in this community. However, that kind of nuanced view that not all youngsters in all schools, schools are the same. The challenges here are very, very different. [Head, Sacred Heart]

ACEs are related to two other key concepts in professionals' vocabulary to explain their troubled pupils' behaviour – 'vulnerability' and 'trauma'. These terms appear very frequently, are applied to a significant proportion of students, and cover a wide range of circumstances. As one of the teachers in Hill Crest High explains:

We highlight what we call 'vulnerable' children. So, they know right, these children are what is defined as vulnerable and vulnerable can mean a wide range of things. So, I'd say we have a high proportion. So, in a year group of 240 children, I would say probably at least 80 of them are identified as vulnerable children. So that would be LAC [looked after] children ... it might be significant bereavement in their life, it might be a mental health, they might be self-harmer, ... they might have low attendance, that might be their vulnerability. What we're now moving towards, and we haven't got there, so it's fine to identify them as vulnerable. But there are levels of vulnerability. [Teacher, Hill Crest High]

The teacher at Westbury adds further diagnoses of vulnerability:

We've got students that are vulnerable because they have additional learning needs, and they don't understand them quite yet ... I've got one girl in particular who I see as vulnerable because she's come to the school having fallen out with her best friend in primary school. [Teacher, Westbury]

Despite the relative breadth of the concept, professionals are able to identify different 'levels' of vulnerability – with 'Level 4' children being most at risk of school exclusion. The teacher at Hill Crest High again:

So, they're vulnerable, but what level of vulnerability are they? Children also go up and down in their vulnerabilities ... We also have within our team, like, sort of a graduated level response, or as in, you have a child who is mainstream accesses everything, but they might be a Level 2 child, which means they access a little bit of wellbeing now and again, they might be a Level 3 child, which means they have specific prescribed regular interventions, or they might be a Level 4 child, which is when they are at significant risk now of exclusions. [Teacher, Hill Crest High]

As with neurological disorders, 'vulnerability' is most often linked to troubled home background. In the following extract, two teachers at Glamor Alternative Provision describe the vulnerability of three of their pupils:

Liam is also in care. He wants to see his mother as much as he can, but sometimes that breaks down So that does have an effect on his school life. So then when he does come into school, then he's quite, he has quite a negative impact on him. And then he can be quite verbally abusive towards members of staff, sometimes go quite far with his verbal abuse.

Carson's mother and father separated Whenever he wanted to see his father, his mother would always kind of put a negative impact on it and say that his father's no good for him and so forth . . . Kane was one of my learners in year eight and year nine, very, very street smart. Again, his parents separated, doesn't really know his father, I think that has a massive effect on him a huge effect on him . . . I think he's finding it difficult to regulate his emotions . . . He believes that nobody likes him. Nobody loves him. And I think that again, that goes back to his father, that he doesn't know his father, he left at a young age.

Like vulnerability, 'trauma' is core concept in the diagnosis of behaviour. As the head-teacher of Bridgeport explains:

You have to try and understand the children's lives, the children's trauma. So, we've done a lot of work in trauma in form this year, not because we're condoning the children's behaviour, not because we don't feel exclusions are warranted, they will still be warranted, but actually we need to have a slightly different approach to understand children and to understand our processes. [Headteacher, Bridgeport]

In the following extract, one pupil's violent behaviour towards others is explained by his trauma:

And, when I say that he's attacked students, they have been quite vicious. And, it's just a shock to look at him. But it's evidently coming from his trauma, it's a learnt behaviour. [Teacher, Westbury]

The importance of finding an underlying diagnosis for pupils whose behaviour puts them at risk of exclusion is evident in the frustration teachers often express when a clear diagnosis does not appear to be forthcoming, for example:

The Year 9 is an ASD youngster, but he presents as an oppositional youngster instead. So, he doesn't present like an ASD youngster, he presents with oppositional behaviours. The Year 8 youngsters have both. One is ADHD, hasn't been consistently medicated and when he's not medicated, he is very, very impulsive. [Teacher, Hill Crest High]

We are looking to apply for statements, but not a statement based on autism – a statement based on behaviour, because there clearly are behavioural concerns and behavioural needs that which may or may not be connected with diagnosis at the moment, they're not connected to a diagnosis. [Teacher, Sacred Heart]

And we can't really get to the bottom of what is going on with him We've put in a referral for him, and nothing's come back from it, which is really frustrating, really frustrating because for me, I can't quite put my finger on it . . . I don't know, he has baffled me, he's really, really baffled me. [Teacher, Westbury]

What is very clear from the professional accounts of the behaviours that either lead to exclusion or put the pupil at risk of exclusion is that they do not appear to give much weight to the accounts provided by pupils themselves as to why they acted in a particular way.

Unravelling professional narratives

The extracts cited above demonstrate how professional accounts of pupils' difficult and disruptive behaviour are heavily influenced by psychosocial theories. Their narratives provide clear evidence of what Haslam (2016) refers to as 'concept creep' whereby terms referring to negative aspects of human experience and behaviour have expanded their meanings. This expansion can occur along two directions. Vertical expansion occurs when a concept's meaning becomes less stringent and includes milder variants than originally intended. Horizontal expansion is when a concept is applied in new contexts. Haslam illustrates concept creep through charting the growing use of concepts such as 'abuse', 'bullying' and 'trauma' – the last of which appears regularly in the professional narratives being discussed here. As Haslam (2016, p. 6) notes, trauma used to refer to a morbid condition produced by physical injury, but now refers to a much wider set of phenomena. It can now not only be used to refer to the direct psychological impact of injury or illness, but also to any event that is *experienced* as traumatic. And traumatic experiences can now include events that need not be outside normal everyday occurrences, such as parental separation.

In a similar vein, Ecclestone (2017, p. 447) has commented on the widespread expansion of the use of the term 'vulnerable' as a descriptor of children and young people. She claims that the 'vertical' creep of vulnerability is reflected by the loosening of official criteria. There is also clear evidence of 'horizontal' creep, as the numbers of conditions that make one 'vulnerable' has expanded to include a wide range of social and psychological experiences. Certainly, the concept of vulnerability is threaded through all of our professionals' accounts and – as noted above – covers a wide range of conditions from finding it difficult to behave in school, safeguarding issues, school-refusing, challenges at home, bereavement, to falling out with friends.

It is possible to argue that the expansion of diagnoses of vulnerability and trauma reflects a growing sensitivity to the difficult circumstances in which many children and young people find themselves, and an increasing awareness of their potential neurological consequences. As Brown et al. (2017) argue, it is possible to see the widening recognition of vulnerabilities as part of a progressive politics which attempts to address the injuries and insults which arise from unequal social structures. From this perspective, the growing diagnoses of psychosocial disorders amongst pupils might be seen as evidence of an increasingly dysfunctional and uncaring education system. It is certainly the case that many of the pupils discussed by our professionals have experienced extremely difficult home circumstances, involving drug addiction, suicide and periods 'in care'.

However, without wishing to downplay the need for diagnoses (which have the added advantage of drawing down resources), or the very difficult domestic circumstances which many children and young people experience, there are concerns that we are undergoing a 'psychiatrisation' of childhood (Coppock, 2020). There has long been concern about the use of the 'medical model' in approaches to the identification of and provision for pupils who have special needs (e.g. Barton, 1997; Oliver, 1990). Despite these concerns, the growing diagnosis of 'disorders' such as ADHD points to the 'colonisation' of everyday life by medicine (Lusardi, 2019). There is increasing use of medication to manage

the behaviour of children diagnosed with this condition. Brown et al. (2017, p. 498) observe that:

... while vulnerability has a deep discursive connection with connotations of empathy and compassion, and can be used in pursuit of enhanced support for certain individuals and groups, there is increasing attention to the ways in which it can also serve regulatory functions when deployed in a normative way,

Similarly, as Haslam (2016, p. 1) comments, the expansion of key psychosocial concepts, such as trauma and vulnerability, reflects an ever-increasing sensitivity to harm. He concludes that its implications are ambivalent:

Although conceptual change is inevitable and often well motivated, concept creep runs the risk of pathologizing everyday experience and encouraging a sense of virtuous but impotent victimhood.

Furedi (2004, p. 203), in particular, is highly critical of the rise of what he sees as a growing ‘therapy culture’ which ‘seeks to exercise control not through a system of punishment, but through cultivating a sense of vulnerability, powerlessness and dependence’.

There is also a tension here between presenting the pupil as a victim of psychosocial disorders and the Welsh Government’s emphasis on the rights of the child. Wales was the first country in the UK to sign up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the language of rights is threaded through the policy documents relating to school exclusion (Power & Taylor, 2023). Welsh Government (2019, p. 9) guidance on exclusions requires that the headteacher allows the pupils ‘to give his or her version of events’ and reminds schools of the importance of Article 12 of the UNCRC which stipulates that it must enable ‘participation and respect for the views of children and young people’ when considering whether to exclude. It may not only be an issue of children’s rights, but also one of clarity and accuracy. If Agnew (1990) is right in his analysis of offenders’ accounts, it might be important to take their accounts seriously. It is the pupils’ views that we consider in the next section.

Pupil perspectives

As we have seen, for the professional, the ‘wicked problem’ of pupil behaviour is regarded as symptomatic of some underlying malaise that needs interpreting and diagnosis. Within the professional narratives, the pupil is presented as a victim of social and psychological disturbance and the origins of the pupil’s behaviour are accounted for in terms of trauma, vulnerability, and neuropsychological diagnoses of ASD, ADHD and ODD associated with ACEs.

However, as is apparent in the following data extracts, the pupil does not recognise themselves as a victim – other than as the victim of a miscarriage of justice. The pupils’ and ex-pupils’ narratives rarely make any reference to personal circumstances or psychological disorders. What their accounts emphasise is the rationality of their actions. What matters is not some ‘background’ explanation, but the immediate circumstances around the incident. In their accounts, their actions can be explained in terms of self-defence – and even heroism.

Miscarriages of justice, self-defence and heroism

While pupils do not tend to present themselves as vulnerable victims of psychosocial disorders brought on by trauma and ACEs, they do often see themselves as victims of miscarriages of justice. In their narratives, they often claim their exclusion arose because they were unfairly accused of offences that were either committed or caused by other pupils, for example:

I got excluded because Tyler shoved a ruler up Jason's arse and they blamed me. [Jayden]

There was this girl and she had a load of problems and she was in my class as well and ... apparently I was stalking her and that and she started calling me a pervert now and that and like I was a paedophile and that ... she screamed and stamped and banged and for her safety they excluded me ... She just gets everything she wants because she's a mong, there's no better way of saying it. [Dewi]

The last time I got excluded, my mate opened Ceri Jones' cubicle and he came out and started shouting 'I'm going to kill you' and he started chasing him down the corridor and then I stood there and then I got blamed for that. [Rhys]

Sometimes, the pupil argued that the unfairness derived from the fact that they were punished for breaking a rule that was widely broken by others, for example:

The teachers targeted me, directly. Say it was summer and everybody was in shorts and all that, shorts and t-shirts. I would be in a shorts and t-shirt, but they excluded me for it, whereas everyone was in it, it was the hottest day of the year. [Osian]

Sometimes, the excluded pupils accepted that they *had* been responsible for the incident, but that the impact was accidental rather than intended, or that the school staff had 'over-reacted', for example:

Fighting, filling the sinks – but it was an accident. Pressed it one too many times like, I didn't know it was going to flood. [Morgan]

I threw stuff, a full bottle of energy drink off the top floor, and it landed in some kid's curry, and the curry went all over him, and I got excluded for three days. [Kyle]

I stole a lock off one of the cupboard doors, and I gave it back and he kept saying 'Oh, that's theft of property'. But I gave it back. [James]

More often than not, though, the pupil claimed that their actions were justifiable as they were acting in self-defence:

He was bullying me, hitting me and that and he didn't get excluded ... He called me ginger and specky eye and he hit me a couple of times, and he didn't ... nothing was done with it, totally. [Kyle]

I was in the Headteacher's office with the Deputy Head and the Headteacher and I wanted to leave, and the Deputy Head wouldn't let me leave so, I punched him in the face. I wanted to leave but he wouldn't let me leave. [James]

As Porter and Ingram (2021) report, girls' difficulties at school are often less visible and overshadowed by the more violent behaviour of boys. Certainly, among our small sample of only three girls, verbal response was more frequent than physical response. For

example, Ceryn had been excluded three times after responding to what she perceived as aggressive or unfair treatment by other pupils. As she explains, on one occasion:

I go to the teacher 'Have you got a pen?', and then this boy, he was like 'Oh, I have a pen', and then this other boy next to him goes 'Don't give her a pen she'll snitch on you' and I literally just goes 'Fuck you' and walked out. [Ceryn]

However, on another occasion she did respond physically:

... this girl, she was winding me up for like three days straight, so I just ... I had enough, and then I just went up and pulled her hair and then started fighting her. ... it happened the other day because some boy, he just kept winding me up, so then I just went up and like hit him ... because he kept threatening, saying he was going to hit me, so I just ran up and hit him because I didn't want him to hit me. Because he keeps saying ... 'Watch, I'm going to spark you on your jaw' ... so I just went and hit him. [Ceryn]

There is some indication that aggression shown to other pupils arose from what they perceived as bullying by others – an issue which Fazel and Newby (2021) also identified as a significant factor in their excluded pupils' experience of school. Several of our excludées cite self-defence as the reason for the actions that led to their exclusion and often argued that they took an unfair distribution of blame, for example:

Remember Daniel, he fucking hit me, I hit him back, I'm the one that got excluded, and he didn't. They just assumed I started it when I didn't. [Owen]

James claims his physical assault was justifiable because he was restrained by the teacher, and had already given him a verbal warning:

They all ganged up on me ... It wasn't more because I hit him, it was a serious injury ... Eight stitches which were above his eye ... I'm just interested in the eyeball ... I only hit him the once ... I got blood on my tracksuit ... I tried to leave the room; he stopped me. But I already gave him a verbal warning ... if he tries to stop me, I'm going to punch him. [James]

In addition to accounts where the exclusion was presented as a case of the misattribution of blame or arising from self-defence, are those narratives where the pupil explains the incident leading up the exclusion as an act of heroism – where they intervened to protect others. Nia, who was permanently excluded, spoke of the significant degree of harassment that went on in school, and her attempt to control things:

They didn't care about the kids when they get hurt, and I didn't like that, because every time the kids had a fight it was always me stopping it, not the school ... They thought it was me jumping in. [Nia]

Osian, who received several fixed-term exclusions, finally got permanently excluded for defending his sister:

Well, the last time was because I hung a kid off a banister ... he was being cheeky saying he was going to do shit to my little sister and so I just hung him off ... I was in the right. I was right in my eyes and his older brother stood there and watched me and he didn't do nothing, and I was two years younger than him, because his brother knew he'd get battered ... I said to him 'you started it at the end of the day you shouldn't have said what you said about my sister' and I said 'I'm not sorry about it' ... and they didn't even exclude him, they give him a detention. [Osian]

In further support of the arguments that we should see disruptive pupil behaviour as rational rather than 'disturbed', are those instances where being excluded is the desired outcome. Ethan, who had received many fixed-term exclusions before being permanently excluded, recalls:

... we'd always aim for the exclusion, if I was getting in trouble for something, because like, it was probably the best punishment you could get, to get you at home, to focus on what I wanted, it was something to aim for ... if I was going to get in trouble for something, anyway, it would always be, okay, let's take it a step further, so, instead of getting detention, getting isolation, it ends up just being okay, have two days at home to focus on what you want, I guess ... I thought the exclusion was helpful to be honest like, I found it quite beneficial for me, because I'd get to spend time focusing on what I care about again. [Ethan]

Unravelling pupil narratives

There are some striking differences between the narratives of pupils and those of professionals in their accounts of the causes of school exclusion. Just as Feingold and Rowley's (2022) primary school pupils describe how what happened in the school led to the behaviours that led to their exclusion, so too do our excluded pupils. And as Hayden and Ward (1996) found out, while teachers interpreted the particular incidences as part of a broader pattern of behaviours, the pupil tended to focus on the incident itself. When pupils, and ex-pupils, talk about the circumstances of their exclusion, they very rarely make any reference to troubled domestic circumstances or diagnoses of psychological disorders. What matters in the pupils' and ex-pupils' accounts is not some 'background' explanation, but the immediate circumstances around the incident. These circumstances, and the choices they were confronted with at the time, are presented as valid and justifiable reasons for their actions.

However, just as there are questions and concerns about the professional discourse, so too must there be questions and concerns about the pupil narratives. For example, it is clear, particularly (but not exclusively) in our male pupils' accounts, that the incidents that led to their exclusion often entailed significant amounts of violence against other pupils and staff – violence that draws on discourses of masculinity that celebrate physical prowess. James' claim 'I'm just interested in the eyeball', and Osian's assertion that he could 'batter' someone who was 'two years younger than him', indicate a celebration of physical 'toughness'.

There are strong parallels here between our ex-cludees' accounts and that of Salem, a young man incarcerated in a youth detention centre for violent offences in Sweden. Andersson (2008), in her forensic analysis of Salem's story, argues that we should see his narrative as a constructive production of the self (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) that draws on a range of cultural resources – especially those of masculinity. Salem presents his actions as justifiable and heroic – a form of 'morality-in-practice'. Just like our ex-cludees, Salem does not see himself as a victim. As Andersson (2008, p. 142) argues: 'as a cultural category, the victim is related to weakness, passivity, and suffering, and can therefore be seen as an unwanted or dispreferred category'. Our respondents, like Salem, claim never to have started an incident, and that any violence on their part was never unwarranted. Our pupils, like Salem, indicate that they find themselves in a situation where

anger is justified and violence becomes necessary. Their actions are always a reply or a response to someone else's transgression.

Without wishing to suggest that these pupils' accounts are fictitious, it may be useful to see them as narrative constructions that are used to repair 'damaged' identities (Lindemann, 2001). It is undeniable that many of the young people interviewed here will have experienced situations – either in the school or outside – where their sense of self has been demeaned. Their narratives of justified and heroic action can be seen as 'counterstories' which Lindemann (2001) argues have the potential to regain moral agency – although she also notes that not all counterstories are well designed to repair damaged identities.

Balancing the different accounts

It is clear from the data and analysis of pupils' and professionals' narratives that they provide two very different perspectives on the causes of behaviours that lead to exclusion from school. As noted earlier, we had hoped to triangulate our data through gathering 'both sides' of the same exclusionary story from pupils and professionals, but were unable to do so. With hindsight, such an ambition would never have been realisable because our professionals and pupils are offering very different kinds of explanation.

The professionals and the pupils are drawing on two very different 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1977). For the professional, the pupil's behaviour is symptomatic of an underlying condition that requires interpretation and diagnosis. Most often the diagnosis entails recognition of the pupil's vulnerability as a victim of trauma, ACEs and neurological disorders, such as ASD, ADHD and ODD. The pupil, on the other hand, does not recognise themselves as a victim – as Andersson (2008) reminds us, the role of 'victim' implies a weak position. The pupil in their explanation rarely makes reference to personal circumstances or psychological disorders. What their accounts emphasise is the rationality of their actions. What matters is not some background explanation, but the immediate context of the incident. As Andersson (2008, p. 157) argues in relation to Salem's narrative, his 'actions should be understood as typical of the *situation*, not typical of him as a *person*' (her emphasis). Similarly, our pupils wish their behaviour to be understood as a response to particular circumstances rather than as an aspect of their character.

In summary, in explaining why a school exclusion happened, the professionals focus on the *pupil*, while the pupils focus on the *event*. The irreconcilability of these two kinds of accounts creates issues not only for understanding the causes of school exclusion, but also for strategies to promote greater understanding between professionals and those pupils whose behaviour makes their continued attendance at school difficult or impossible. In presenting these contrasting narratives, we are not seeking to elevate one above the other. Clearly both versions have elements of 'truth' in them.

Perhaps because they are both drawing on different 'regimes of truth', it would appear that professionals do not give much credence to the accounts of the pupils – or perhaps even hear them. When asked about whether they had been able to present their version of the events that led to their exclusion, or had their views taken seriously, not one of our pupil respondents answered in the affirmative. Typical responses include: 'They don't try to understand' [Jack]; 'They only hear the teacher's side' [Jay].

In parallel with the pupils in Caslin's (2021) research, our pupils felt they were inevitably going to be disbelieved because of their reputation, for example:

I reckon the person who was handling the exclusions ... he wouldn't hear your side or nothing ... because we were naughty kids in school ... So, he wouldn't listen to us, even if it wasn't our fault sometimes. [Owen]

They don't help you; they don't try and help you or try and understand you. They all just like jump to conclusions and they'll label you as like a bad kid, instead of like ... actually sitting down and talking to you. [Ceryn]

On occasions, it would appear that the lack of attention given to the pupil's account exacerbated the situation, e.g.:

Half the time they wouldn't even listen. They'd just cut me off when I was speaking, they would cut me off. I'd be in a meeting with them ... when I was trying to speak to them 'blah-blah-blah'. That's what got me so angry. At one point I remember I was in a meeting and said 'fuck this'. I said 'I can't do this' because they were just speaking over me. They wouldn't let me speak. I slammed the door. I opened the door and went. I said, 'I'm going home'. [Osian]

Lewis complained that:

If you argue you just get excluded longer.

Of course, we do not know the extent to which the professionals attempted to gain the pupils' view or listened to their accounts. What is clear, though, is that the pupils do not *feel* they were heard. Even if we accept that there is some distortion in the pupils' accounts, and that they do not understand the underlying causes of their dispositions to behave in particular ways (and who does?), then we might want to give them greater credibility than they currently appear to have. Indeed, in relation to schools and other organisations, Becker (1967, p. 242) argues that we should be sceptical of superordinates' accounts because they 'develop ways both of denying the failure of the institution to perform as it should and explaining those failures which cannot be hidden'. School exclusions are undeniably a visible manifestation of institutional failure. We do not wish to suggest that we should dismiss the professional accounts, but rather that we might want to rebalance the 'hierarchy of credibility' in favour of the pupil. For, as Agnew (1990, p. 270) argues, even if it is the case that young offenders' accounts are distortions, it is still useful to examine such distortions. He suggests that they 'represent the public motives' of offenders' actions and as such might themselves contribute to the replication of behaviours. Indeed, he argues that unravelling the 'distortions' may potentially provide one way of 'rehabilitating' young offenders.

Not only might it be important to take pupils' explanations seriously because they could have some validity, it also may contribute to an increased sense of agency. One of the problems associated with the rise of therapeutic culture and the psychiatrisation of childhood is that it implies a diminished attribution of personal agency. Furedi (2004, p. 196) argues that therapeutic governance 'is underwritten by a political culture that characteristically has a relatively weak sense of individual capacity'. Indeed, he claims that the cultivation of vulnerability contributes to the diminution of the citizen as a rational agent. It might be inferred that seeing the offending pupil as suffering from a psychosocial disorder, transforms the pupil into a patient. Pupils' versions of events should not be

dismissed because of the 'other things' that are going on in their lives. Indeed, it is hard to see how a dialogue between pupil and professional can begin without giving the young person's perspective some credibility. Seeing them as suffering from various disorders will do little to encourage in them a sense of individual capacity and agency.

Note

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Data availability statement

Due to ethical concerns, supporting data cannot be made openly available. Further information about the data and conditions for access are available at the UK Data Archive at <http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/>.

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