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Parents' perceptions of power in the school exclusion process examined through Arnstein's ladder of participation

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ABSTRACT

Parents have highlighted that they felt powerless in the school exclusion process because school staff speak louder and have all the authority. This study draws on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation to analyse parents' experiences of the school exclusion process. At the bottom of Arnstein's ladder is nonparticipation; citizens cannot participate in decision-making in this domain. The following domain is tokenism. This is where citizens have a voice and are heard, but their views are not considered. The final domain at the top of the ladder is citizen control; this is where citizens have varying degrees of decision-making power. This paper uses data from semi-structured interviews with parents to understand their children's experiences of school, measures that schools implemented to prevent exclusions, and how they experienced the school exclusion process. The data showed that parents could feel manipulated in the school exclusion process when they were involved too late when school staff had already decided to exclude their children. Conversely, some parents felt that they had the power to influence decisions and valued working in partnership with school staff to inform the sanction their child would receive and avoid permanent exclusion. It is concluded that not all parents have equal influence in the school exclusion process. The findings of this research highlight the need to make sure that all parents are given the opportunity to participate in the exclusion process to ensure that the education system is fairer and more inclusive.

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Introduction

Exclusion from school is when children are asked to leave the school building. If they are excluded for a fixed term, they are asked not to attend the school for a specified time. If children are permanently excluded, they cannot return to the school, and an alternative educational placement needs to be sought (Welsh Government, 2019). There are many adverse outcomes associated with exclusion from school, including unemployment,

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poor mental and physical health, homelessness and being more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Demie, 2022; Farouk, 2017; Power & Taylor, 2021). Research and school exclusion figures repeatedly highlight that pupils who are entitled to free school meals (FSM), have additional learning needs (ALN) and are from ethnic minority groups are disproportionately excluded from school (Demie, 2022; DfE, 2019; Feingold & Rowley, 2022). Feingold and Rowley (2022) express concern that the links between school exclusion and inequality have not been made and may have been exacerbated by the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Demie (2022) highlights that while researchers have recognised the importance of understanding parents' experiences and influence within the exclusion process, few studies have been conducted, meaning parents' stories are rarely heard.

There has been limited previous research that has examined how parents experience exclusion in Wales. Snap Cymru examined parents' experiences of illegal exclusion (Butler, 2011). The Snap Cymru report defines an *illegal exclusion* as when schools ask parents to keep their children off school without following the proper process and without giving parents and guardians formal notice of exclusion (Butler, 2011). This report acknowledges that the correct term for this type of exclusion is "unlawful exclusion" but uses "illegal" because it is more widely used (Butler, 2011, p. 2). Snap Cymru's research also found examples of parents being forced to accept a managed move or being told a managed move was happening and not being given a chance to appeal (Butler, 2011).

The Children's Commissioner (2020) examined how parents of children in the foundation stage (aged 3–7) experienced exclusion. The Children's Commissioner (2020) analysed 21 cases, and common themes were that children were isolated and excluded, referral processes for assessments of special educational needs were confusing, and there were delays in meeting children's needs. There is more research on exclusion from school in England (for example, see Demie, 2022; DfE, 2019; Farouk, 2017) than in Wales, although there are some examples (for example, see Power & Taylor, 2021; Power & Taylor, 2024). Despite the proliferation of research in England, Demie (2022) suggests that there is scant research on parents' experiences of their children being excluded from school, although there is some research on the experiences of parents of children with additional learning needs (ALN) (for examples see Martin-Denham, 2022; Parker et al., 2016). Since devolution in 1999, Wales has had a different policy context than England, which encourages cooperation rather than competition, universalism rather than choice, diversity, and progressivism rather than traditionalisation (Power & Taylor, 2021). Although some research examples examine how parents experience exclusion in Wales (Butler, 2011; Children's Commissioner, 2020), there seems to be no recent research on how the parents of secondary school children in Wales experience the school exclusion process.

There is a gap in knowledge as there is scant recent research on how parents experience the school exclusion process in Wales. Moreover, this study addresses this gap by suggesting a typology to conceptualise parents' experiences of the school exclusion process. This study will answer the following three research questions:

1. Do the parents of children at risk of exclusion from school feel meaningfully involved in the exclusion process?
2. Do the parents of children at risk of exclusion feel they have any power to influence decisions in the school exclusion process?

3. Does Arnstein's ladder provide a useful framework to explore parents' understanding of the school exclusion process, and does it give a more substantiative understanding of the issues parents face during the exclusion process?

This paper first explores the school exclusion policy context in Wales, how the Welsh Government captures the views of parents, and the additional learning need (ALN) system in Wales. Second, the literature on school exclusion and parent and carers involvement in the school exclusion process is examined. Most of the literature on school exclusion in the UK is from England, and the literature review reflects this. Third, the value of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation is explored as a conceptual framework to answer the research questions. Fourth, the results are presented after describing the methodology, and the aspects of nonparticipation, degrees of tokenism and degrees of citizen control to describe parents' participation in the school exclusion process are discussed. Finally, the implications of involving parents in the school exclusion process are discussed.

The Welsh Government's (2023) latest figures show an increase in the number of pupils receiving exclusion and an overrepresentation of pupils with specific characteristics. The Welsh Government (2023) data shows the number of fixed-term exclusions of 5 days or less increasing from 28 in 2011/12 to 50.6 pupils in 2021/22 per 1,000 pupils. There has been an increase in the number of pupils receiving a permanent exclusion from 0.1 in 2011/12 to 0.5 in 2021/22 per 1,000 pupils (Welsh Government, 2023). The Welsh Government (2023) figures also show that exclusion rates are four times higher for pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM). These figures also show that pupils with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) needs had the highest rates of exclusions in 2021/22 (Welsh Government, 2023). The rate of fixed-term exclusions for pupils with an ADHD SEN/ALN was 406.4 per 1,000 pupils, and the fixed-term exclusions with a BESD SEN/ALN were 393.9 per 1,000 pupils (Welsh Government, 2023).

The policy context in Wales

Wales was the first country in the UK to formally adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the basis of policymaking relating to children and young people (Welsh Government, 2022). Power and Taylor (2024) explain the dominant discourse in Welsh policy, either before or after a school exclusion, is on the rights of the child. Power and Taylor (2024) highlight that pupils and parents are given information about their rights and how they can challenge decisions. This is set out for parents in the Welsh Government's (2019) guidance on school exclusion. For children, the Welsh Government's (2015) "Are you being excluded from school?" provides pupils with information on why pupils can be excluded, when schools should not exclude and describes the processes for appealing a decision to exclude (Power & Taylor, 2024).

The rights of parents to be consulted in the school exclusion process in Wales

In Wales, the school's governing body must form a discipline committee when a headteacher decides to permanently exclude or give a pupil a fixed-term exclusion of 15 days or

more in one school term (Welsh Government, 2019). The discipline committee should include governors from varied backgrounds and not the headteacher (Welsh Government, 2019). Parents and carers can also ask the Chair to convene a disciplinary committee if their child has received a fixed term exclusion, with no statutory limits to the length of exclusion (Welsh Government, 2019). The learner and parent/carer have the right to attend the disciplinary committee, and they can be accompanied by a friend or an advocate (Snap Cymru, 2024). After the independent appeal, parents/carers and young people can go to the Ombudsman and make a complaint. After a learner has been permanently excluded, it is the responsibility of the local authority (LA) to secure appropriate provision, full-time, if possible, within 15 days, preferably in another school or, if necessary, a pupil referral unit (PRU) or alternative provision (Welsh Government, 2019).

Welsh Government capturing the views of parents

In 2011, the Welsh Government commissioned third-sector organisation, Snap Cymru, to capture parents' views on the school exclusion process (Butler, 2011). As Snap Cymru performed casework, they had access to parents whose children had experienced various forms of exclusion, including illegal exclusion, when parents are asked to keep their children off school without the formal school exclusion process being followed (Butler, 2011). This research showed that parents repeatedly reported that schools did not communicate well with them, and when they did, school staff could be "authoritarian and negative" (Butler, 2011, p. 10). Snap Cymru (2024) continues to provide advice, support and advocacy services for the parents of children with additional learning needs (ALN).

In 2020, the Children's Commissioner investigated school exclusion in Wales's foundation phase (ages 3–7). The Children's Commissioner (2020) analysed their casework and found examples of children being isolated and excluded, gaps in education and delays in meeting young people's needs. More recently, beneficiary-led third-sector organisation Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales (EYST) has launched the "Right to Education" project, an all-Wales educational advocacy and support service for ethnic minority pupils and parents (Abramson, 2024). The Right to Education project combines casework with research, and initial findings show that in addition to language barriers, ethnic minority families can feel less confident in communicating with school staff, especially headteachers, and parents can lack the resources to challenge unjust and unfair decisions (Abramson, 2024).

The additional learning needs (ALN) system in Wales

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system in Wales has recently been overhauled, replacing the old Special Educational Needs (SEN) system (Welsh Government, 2021). The Welsh Government (2021) explains that the system aims to ensure greater consistency and continuity of provision with Individual Development Plans (IDPs) being put together and integrating arrangements for pupils by bringing together school-led interventions and local authority-issued statements. The Welsh Government's (2019) guidance on school exclusion was in place at the time of the interviews; it has recently been updated (for the updated guidance, see Welsh Government, 2024). This study took place after the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal

(Wales) Bill 2018, the new framework for supporting children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN). Therefore, ALN is used to refer to additional learning needs rather than special educational needs (SEN) throughout the paper. The Welsh Government's (2019, p. 19) guidance on school exclusion explains that "other than in the most exceptional circumstances schools should avoid permanently excluding learners with statements of special educational needs (SEN)."

The literature

As previously mentioned, most of the literature on school exclusion from the UK is from England. The Timpson review of school exclusion in England began with a call for people to share evidence and experiences of exclusion (DfE, 2019). Of the 1,000 responses received, over two-thirds, representing 70%, were from parents and carers, and 82% were from parents of children who had experienced exclusion (DfE, 2019). These parents spoke of how disruptive and poorly managed exclusion processes were for their families and did not feel that exclusions were always fair (DfE, 2019).

The literature explains that parents felt they were not listened to, and this affected their sense of power and control. Parker et al.'s (2016) study on parents and children's experiences of exclusion in primary school found that parents expressed a sense of failure, guilt, sadness and disappointment because they felt they could have prevented an exclusion if they had advocated more for their child. Research explains that there are communication difficulties between parents and school staff and challenges with communication are exacerbated during the school exclusion process (Parker et al., 2016; Sproston et al., 2017). The literature also highlights that parents felt they were not told early enough about their child's behavioural issues, and if they had been involved earlier, they could have intervened and prevented them from escalating (Demie, 2022; Parker et al., 2016).

Research explains that family involvement has many positive aspects, especially when parents know the system, support, and resources their child needs (Demie, 2022; Parker et al., 2016). Parker et al.'s (2016) research found that some parents felt disempowered and lacked confidence, which could impact their ability to advocate for their children. Greenaway-Clarke and Franklin (2023) examined how trained advocates could advocate for children with disabilities. They note that advocacy is a powerful tool to support the voice of disabled children. When the voices of disabled children and their parents are not heard, this has consequences for their rights to education (Greenaway-Clarke & Franklin, 2023).

In research on the inequality of working-class pupils in England, Reay (2017) highlights that middle-class families have an advantage because they have a sense of belonging to the education system, which comes with affluence and a family history of privilege. Reay (2017) suggests that working-class families will not have the same confidence and sense of entitlement as middle-class families in the education system. Reay (2017) explains how the education system perpetuates disadvantage and how negative representations and "othering" of the working classes persist. Cruz et al. (2024) argue that systems of exclusion continue to marginalise students, including ableism and racism, and normalise and justify exclusion from learning.

In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks (2014) suggests that the classroom can be a radical place of possibility for all children. Cruz et al. (2024) propose that if classrooms

are to be a place of promise for radical change, as hooks contended, more needs to be done than giving pupils with various labels more than physical access to the classroom. hooks (2014) explains that in classrooms, focus tends to be placed on the economically privileged's views, attitudes and experiences at the expense of working-class pupils. hooks's (2014, p. 185) work focuses on "coming to voice" because it was so clear that some pupils are more empowered by race, class and sex privilege, which gave their voices more "authority" than others. hooks (2014) distinguishes between a shallow emphasis on democratising voice, where it is wrongly assumed that everyone's words will have equal time and value, and a more complex recognition of each voice's uniqueness and the need to create classroom spaces where all voices are heard because pupils feel free to speak because they know their presence is recognised and valued.

Conversely, Cruz et al. (2024) suggest that hooks did not write from a holistic perspective, as her work predominantly focused on gender and race, and this has prompted criticism for perpetuating negative views of disability. Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees (2023, p. 1156) suggest that there have been "monolithic understandings" of disability which ignore how it intersects with other inequalities. Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees (2023) focused on the interaction of disability and parental social class to examine the potential to perpetuate disadvantage. Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees (2023) suggest that despite a plethora of research on social class in education, there has been scant research on the intersection of social class with disability and how different systems and power structures in education (re)produce disadvantages. With limited research in this area, it is difficult to know whether power structures in the school exclusion process disempower parents and perpetuate disadvantage for their children with ALN.

First, the policy context in Wales was examined, and an overview of the research that sought to capture parents' views on the exclusion process was explored. Education policy in Wales emphasises a rights-based approach; Wales was the first country in the UK to adopt the UNCRC as the basis for policymaking for children and young people (Power & Taylor, 2024). The Welsh Government's (2019, 2024) guidance on school exclusion gives parents and pupils information about their rights and how to challenge exclusions. The Welsh Government (2021) has recently reformed the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system, and the new approach aims to ensure that parents participate in decisions about their children's education. While there are rights-based approaches and an ethos of participation in Welsh policy, previous research on school exclusion from Wales has found that parents experienced unlawful exclusions where their children were sent home without the school following the formal exclusion process (Butler, 2011; Children's Commissioner, 2020).

Second, the literature on school exclusion was explored. The literature from England shows that parents do not feel meaningfully involved in the school exclusion process; they think that their voices are not heard, and communication from school staff is minimal and misleading (DfE, 2019; Parker et al., 2016). The literature suggests that parents, particularly working-class parents, do not feel that they have the power to influence decisions in the exclusion process (DfE, 2019; Parker et al., 2016; Reay, 2017). The next section of the paper explores power using Foucault's (2019) notions of governmentality and Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. Next, the applicability of Arnstein's (1969) ladder as a conceptual lens for exploring parents' engagement in the school exclusion process is examined.

Theory

According to Foucault's (2019) governmentality theory, power is not limited to the state; a person, class, or group does not possess it. Instead, it is the form of social control used in disciplinary institutions, including hospitals and schools. Foucault (2019) suggests that power only exists when it is exercised by some on others. Macleod and Durrheim (2002, p. 3) explain that according to Foucault, modern government is a complex system composed of institutions, processes, reflection and strategies where different means are used to accomplish specific goals. Wilkins and Gobby (2022) applied Foucault's concept of governmentality to school governance; in the school exclusion process, schools are an instrument of control to which the parents of children at risk of exclusion are subject.

Foucault's (2019) theory is a helpful starting point for exploring how power is exercised by school staff on parents in the school exclusion process. Macleod and Durrheim (2002) highlight that even though Foucault's theory suggests that one person does not hold power, it does not mean that individuals or groups are treated equally where power is exercised in government. Foucault's (2019) theories are helpful in conceptualising power, but they do not provide enough of an analytical lens for a more substantive understanding of parents' experiences of the school exclusion process. Next it is explored whether Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, which describes different levels of participation in the decision-making process, is helpful in understanding how parents experience the school exclusion process.

Arnstein's (1969) illustrative ladder of citizen participation is a typology describing different levels of participation (see Figure 1). The ladder was designed by Sherry Arnstein (1969, p. 216), who said, "Citizen participation is like spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you". Arnstein (1969) designed the ladder to explore citizen participation in the urban planning process in the USA to address systemic unfairness towards some communities purported to be consulted as part of the development process.

Research by Sewell (2023) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed worsening inequalities within the education system. Sewell (2023) suggests that although the concept of voice practice can be simple, it is only meaningful if it leads to real action that addresses power imbalances and promotes social justice. Arnstein (1969, p. 216) highlights that there is a difference between participating in an "empty ritual of participation" and having the power to affect the outcome of a process. Sewell (2023) highlights that Arnstein's (1969) ladder is the seminal model of citizen participation as sixty years after its inception, it continues to influence educational practitioners who seek to listen and act on the voices and perspectives of others.

Arnstein's (1969) typology has three domains: nonparticipation, tokenism, and citizen control. They are arranged on a ladder with eight rungs distributed between these categories; each rung describes the amount of power citizens have to influence decisions (Arnstein, 1969). At the bottom of the ladder is nonparticipation, where powerholders try to educate or cure citizens under the guise of participation (Arnstein, 1969). In rung one, "manipulation," powerholders seek to educate citizens; in rung two, "therapy," powerholders equate powerlessness with mental illness and engage citizens in group therapy (Arnstein, 1969, p. 218).

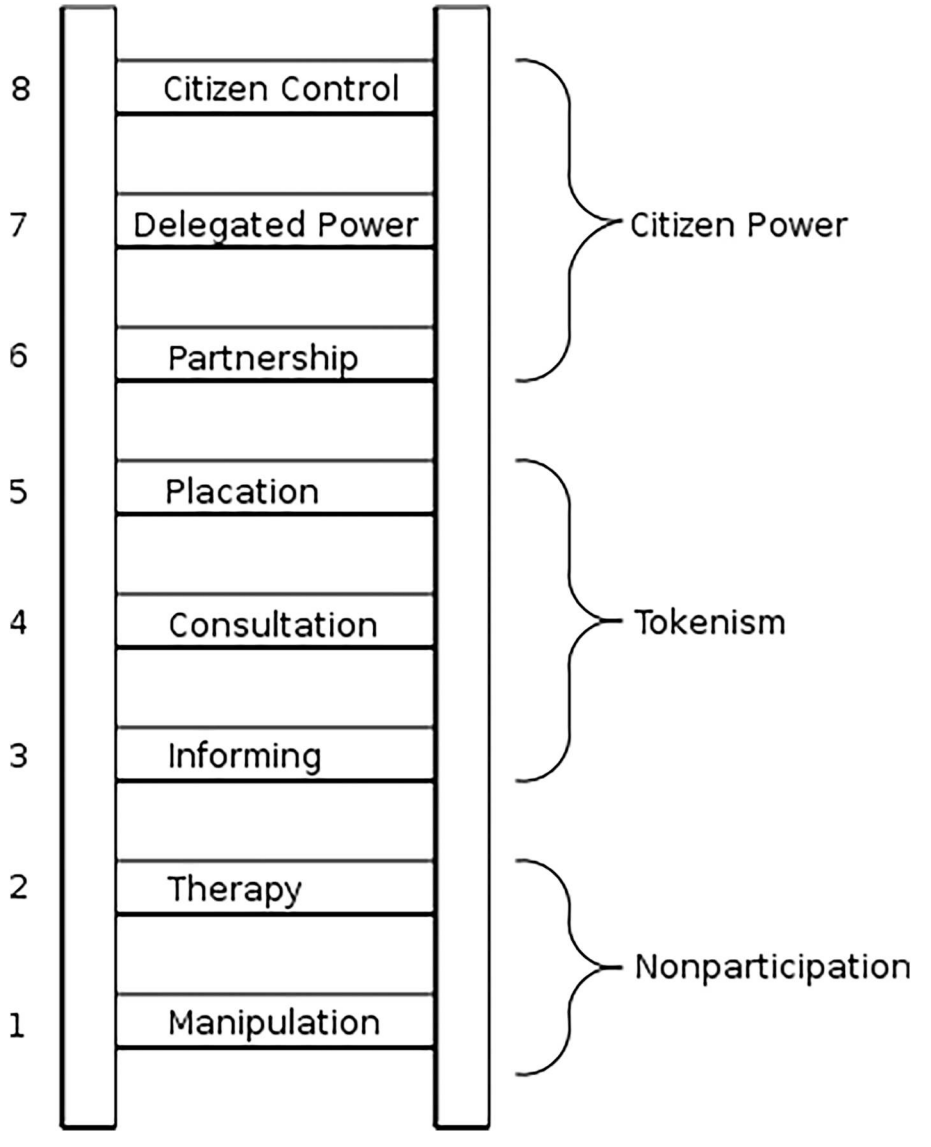

Figure 1. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation.

The tokenism domain is in the middle of the ladder. Arnstein (1969) explains this can be a step towards genuine participation. This is where the powerholders listen to citizens, but citizens still lack the power to have their views acted upon by the powerholders (Arnstein, 1969). In rung three, "informing," the powerholders control meetings and communication by providing inadequate information, not encouraging questions and giving irrelevant answers (Arnstein, 1969, p. 219). Rung four is "consulting". Arnstein (1969) notes that if consultation is not combined with other modes of participation, it is a sham because there is no guarantee that citizens' concerns or ideas will be considered. Rung five is "placation", where citizens advise powerholders and have some influence, but the powerholders retain the right to make decisions (Arnstein, 1969, p. 220).

It is only at the top of the ladder in the citizen control domain that citizens begin to have decision-making power. Characterised by rung six, "partnership" where citizens can negotiate trade-offs with the traditional power holders, rung seven is "delegated power", where negotiation between citizens and powerholders can result in citizens achieving dominant decision-making (Arnstein, 1969, p. 222). In rung eight, "citizen control", citizens have the full managerial power to make most decisions (Arnstein, 1969, p. 223).

Research by Varwell (2022, p. 130) examined the literature on Arnstein's ladder of participation over the last 50 years, and found that it had been used across many sectors, including planning and the environment, health, higher education, housing and in schools and with young people, and has been referred to as "inspirational", "seminal" and "foundational." Varwell (2022) highlights that the literature suggests Arnstein's (1969) ladder is a useful starting point for exploring citizen participation because of its simplicity. Arnstein's (1969) typology is used to explore how much power the parents of children at risk of exclusion have to influence school staff's decision to exclude. Table 1 contains a brief description of the eight rungs of the ladder and how they could apply to parents' participation in the school exclusion process.

A study by Stelmach (2016) analysed parents' involvement in school councils through Arnstein's (1969) lens of citizen participation. Stelmach (2016, p. 278) acknowledges the "arbitrariness" of interpreting data over eight levels, noting, as Arnstein (1969) did, that the categories are not "pure distinctions." However, Stelmach (2016) felt that the structure and mandate of school councils were sufficiently homogenous to enable the

Table 1. Arnstein's Ladder applied to the school exclusion process adapted from Sewell (2023).

Rung	Example
Manipulation	A school leader informs parents that the only alternative to permanent exclusion for their child is a managed move to another school. The Welsh Government's (2019) guidance on school exclusion states that a managed move should only happen with consent from parents, the child, and the LA and never as an alternative to permanent exclusion.
Therapy	Parents know that their child is being bullied because they have ASD. There was a behavioural incident when their child reacted to the bullying. School staff want to address the child's behaviour rather than deal with the bullying. Despite their child being well-behaved in lessons, school staff suggest moving them to specialist provision.
Informing	The headteacher invites parents to a meeting about their child's behaviour. The parents believe they have a say because they have been called to a meeting. The school leader had already decided on a behaviour plan for their child. The meeting was designed for the school leader to record that they have informed the parents.
Consultation	The school runs a survey to capture parents' views. They only ask questions that concern the school, which means that only concerns that matter to the school are recorded and acted on. Parents with concerns about their child's support needs, which could lead to negative behaviour and exclusion, cannot express this in the survey (Sewell, 2023).
Placation	Parents are involved in putting together an Individual Development Plan (IDP) that explains the best strategies to support their child and prevent negative behaviour. However, the reasonable adjustments identified in the IDP are not implemented.
Partnership	School staff work with parents to put together an IDP, which is implemented. School staff continue to work with parents to support their child and determine the most appropriate sanction for dealing with negative behaviour.
Delegation	Parents are school governors and are given decision-making authority, including the decision to exclude a pupil. However, as school exclusion disproportionately affects some pupils, e.g. ALN, Black and Minority Ethnic, and socio-economically disadvantaged children, delegation in terms of school exclusion will not be achieved until school governors represent the parents of these pupils.
Citizen control	This is a citizen-controlled school where parents are involved in governing the school. Parents are in full charge of school exclusion policies and management and can negotiate the circumstances under which outsiders can change them (Arnstein, 1969).

identification of convergent factors which contribute to or hinder participation. Stelmach (2016) found that parents (citizens) could be intimidated by educational hierarchies and that educators (powerholders) could hold deficit assumptions about parents, particularly of socio-economically deprived and ethnic minority families. This could exacerbate conflict, especially around competing agendas between parents on the school council and school staff (Stelmach, 2016). Stelmach (2016, p. 278) found that much of the parents' participation in school councils was tokenistic because educators and educational leaders continued to hold the decision-making power, evidenced by parents taking a more informal role and through a "parent-educator dynamic of denial and deferral."

Arnstein's (1969) typology of citizen participation, which measures the level of citizen power in the decision-making process, is used to answer the research questions and explore parents' participation in the school exclusion process. The following section explains the methods that were used to answer the research questions.

Methods

The data used in this study were collected as part of the Excluded Lives project, an ESRC project on school exclusion. The Excluded Lives project examined the exclusion of secondary school children from schools across the four jurisdictions of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This paper uses the data from interviews with parents in Wales. The ethics committee at Oxford University gave ethics approval for this research, reference ED-C1A-20-057. After ethical approval was received, recruitment and data collection commenced. Table 2 shows the number of interviews collected across the project in all four jurisdictions. This paper is focused on the interviews with parents in Wales.

Because of limited research on parents' experiences of the exclusion process, semi-structured interviews were considered the appropriate data-collection method. As this was exploratory research, it was considered that surveys or highly structured interviews could weaken data collection (Blackstone, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were valuable because they helped capture parents' feelings of power and powerlessness. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their views and enabled the interviewer to follow up on unexpected leads that were not in the original interview questions.

Interviews explored notions of power based on Foucault's (2019) concept of governmentality, exploring the relationship between parents and school staff and examining whether parents had the power to influence decisions. Interview questions explored the experiences that led to their children's exclusion, their relationship with school

Table 2. Total number of interviews (includes some focus group interviews).

	LA /agency officers	Alternative provision providers	School staff	Parents/ carers	Pupils/ excludees	Total
England	25	13	124	9	15	186
N Ireland	10	4	45	4	14	77
Scotland	10	5	59	7	8	89
Wales	9	13	38	11	16	87
Total	54	35	266	31	53	439

Power et al. (2024)

staff, whether their children were given any support, whether the school tried any other interventions, how their child's exclusion was explained to them and the impact the fixed term or permanent exclusion had on them and their family.

Potential participants were invited to participate in the study if their children had been excluded or were at risk of exclusion from school. Participants were recruited through emails, including a recruitment poster and information sheet which was sent to case study local authorities, and core schools selected as part of the project and third-sector organisations that worked with excluded children and their parents. These organisations circulated the details of the study to potential participants. The recruitment poster was also shared on social media.

Participants responded to the recruitment poster by emailing, texting, or phoning the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study. The researcher asked participants to select how they wanted to be interviewed; via video call, telephone or in person. Two participants were interviewed over video call and nine on the telephone. Verbal informed consent was obtained. The researcher read out the information sheet and then went through the verbal version of the consent form with participants at the start of the interview. Participants were told they could withdraw from the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were told their identities and their children's identities would be confidential and not identifiable in any publications. Eleven parents participated in semi-structured interviews; ten mothers and one father were interviewed. More details of the sample are in Table 3. Some parents were step-parents, some were foster carers, and all self-identified as parents.

Data collection took place from May 2022 to January 2023. Interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and were transcribed verbatim. The value of the qualitative approach produced through the semi-structured interviews was that data could be analysed, producing valuable and insightful narratives about participants' experiences of the school exclusion process. Informed by Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation presented in Figure 1 as the analytic lens, a thematic analysis was undertaken. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) approach, phase one was familiarisation with the data. This involved "repeated reading" in an active way to search for meanings and patterns. Phase two involved generating an initial list of codes for the data, and this was also where data was set against Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. In phase three focus

Table 3. The sample.

Participant	Parent's gender	Child's gender	Child's year group	The child's diagnosis of ALN
1	Female	Male	Year 8	Being assessed for Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
2	Female	Male	Year 9	No diagnosis or suspected ALN
3	Male	Male	Year 11	Diagnosed with Developmental Trauma
4	Female	Female	Year 8	Diagnosed with ASD
5	Female	Male	Year 11	Diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
6	Female	Male	Year 9	Diagnosed with ADHD
7	Female	Male	Year 7	Diagnosed with ADHD, ASD, Tourette's, and learning difficulties.
8	Female	Male	Year 11	ASD and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA).
9	Female	Male	Year 11	ADHD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD).
10	Female	Male	Year 11	ADHD, hearing loss and detachment difficulties.
11	Female	Male	Year 10	ASD

was placed on searching for overarching themes, rather than codes; this is where codes were combined to form overarching themes. In phase four, themes were reviewed, and the validity of individual themes concerning the data set was considered; this was repeated until theoretical saturation occurred.

In order to uncover participants' experiences, the author needed to acknowledge their positionality as a researcher and its influence on the research process (Yip, 2024). The author had worked as an adult education and alternative provision tutor working with children and young people who had been diagnosed with ALN and was aware of the challenges some of them had faced in mainstream education. Peer debriefing was used to minimise potential bias; this involved discussing the research with the project lead for Wales, who advised on recruitment, interviews and coding (Greene, 2014).

Limitations

It is essential to acknowledge that this research has limitations. A limitation of this study is that it only looks at parents' views, and school staff's views are not considered. Interviews were also completed with school staff as part of the Excluded Lives project (see Table 2 for more details). This is a limitation because decision-making in the school exclusion process involves school staff and parents. It is acknowledged that school staff will also have challenges working with parents during the school exclusion process. However, this paper examines parents' experience of power and powerlessness in the school exclusion process. Other research outputs of the Excluded Lives project will report on the views of school staff.

Results

In accordance with the traditions of thematic research, the results presented below are accompanied by selected quotes from the interviews. These selected quotes are related to the emergent themes through the coding process and are described below under Arnstein's (1969) categories of citizen participation.

Nonparticipation: manipulation

Participants gave examples of not being listened to and only being contacted once it was too late to prevent an exclusion. Parents felt that school staff wanted to prove they were involved in the exclusion process, but the decision to exclude had already been made. Parents also reported no communication with schools, with communication breaking down when they started questioning them.

> When I started questioning staff actions and words, they treated me completely differently. The [Safeguarding lead] sent me an email saying (because of) my constant questioning of staff actions and words, they will no longer be communicating with me (Participant 9).

> The first communication was after four weeks, when we got an email saying, "Things aren't working out. We need to have an emergency meeting". We were under the impression that everything was going fantastic. It didn't happen for about four days. (They said) "Can we come in next Tuesday?" It's not much of an emergency if you're not doing it for four days (Participant 4).

Another example of "manipulation" was when school staff told parents the only alternative to a managed move was a permanent exclusion.

> He was suspended about three or four times, and that's when they said, "We are looking at a permanent exclusion," but that's when the Head, he wasn't even the Headmaster, he was the Head of Year, said about the Step-up alternative provision, he said, "It's not going to be permanent or anything, it could be three terms" I think he said that it was Dylan's[1] only option. (Participant 1).

Nonparticipation: therapy

Ten participants felt that their children had been failed by schools either because schools had not made reasonable adjustments because of their children's ALN or because they had not dealt with their children being bullied. The parents of children with ALN also felt that they had to fight because they felt that schools were "failing vulnerable children."

> He was fine in primary school because he had support because he has some needs. In secondary school, he did not have the support he needed, so he struggled. Then, in Year 10, he really struggled, and his behaviour started going downhill. He disengaged with school, which led to where we are now. It has been seven weeks since he has been excluded (Participant 5).

> The school failed. He (needs) 20 hours a week of support … There should be a TA (Teaching Assistant) in class with him. So if it is a supply teacher that day and the girls are lobbing rubbers at him, giggling, or shouting names, or the bullies are saying something like he stinks, then the TA can step in and stop it from escalating. But the incidents have been allowed to escalate because he hasn't had his needs met. The tensions have built up, and they've escalated to a point where all the holes in the Swiss Cheese have all lined up, and it's gone pop (Participant 8).

Degrees of tokenism: informing

In the middle of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, the tokenism domain is where citizens are listened to but do not have the power to inform decisions. Participants felt that school staff were unwilling to listen to them about things they could do differently to help their children modify their behaviour.

> They didn't listen to me as a parent; they didn't get on board with what I'd said to them and asked them to do or not to do. Sometimes, I didn't agree with exclusions at all. I kept telling them not to put their hands on him, not to try to pick him up and drag him across the room. That was one thing I did ask them to do, which they wouldn't do (Participant 1).

> The school's natural response was around detentions, isolations, exclusions. My instinct at that stage was to say to the school, "I understand why you do those things, but let me tell you about this kid's background. Let me tell you about what works for him at home. What triggers him, and why he does some of these things." I just came up against a huge brick wall. If anything, the school put more effort into pushing me away and keeping me out of it (Participant 3).

Degrees of tokenism: consultation

Rung four of Arnstein's (1969) ladder is "consultation"; whilst this can be a step towards full participation, powerholders can restrict citizens' input at this level and not consider

their views. Only one participant spoke of consultation. Participant 3 spoke of being "shouted down" when he attended a school inspectorate event as part of a consultation at his son's school.

> I went once; they were going through an inspection. They invited parents to come in and (participate in) a bit of a Q&A. I felt it was my duty to do that. There was hardly anyone there; there was me, another guy, and his son has autism, and we were the ones who I could identify as parents. Everyone else was a parent, but they were also teachers, teaching staff, and governors. It was not a fair representation, and I commented, "Well, this is where the school's good. However, I would say that they're not great in this area." I was shouted down at every opportunity. When I read the report, it was not reflective of anything that I had said or what the other parent had said (Participant 3).

Degrees of tokenism: placation

On rung five of Arnstein's (1969) ladder is "placation"; this is where citizens hold some influence, but tokenism is still apparent. Participants reflected that sometimes they could influence decisions. Participant 6 gave the example of a situation that escalated after a teacher had asked her son to sit at the front of the class.

> His headteacher is very good; a situation escalated because one of the teachers had made him sit in front. We were sure that it was put in his documentation that he doesn't like sitting at the front. He feels pulled out in front of the other students and made to feel different. He hates the fact he's got ADHD; he's got a statement. (The head-teacher) sent an email to all the teachers to remind them that he's not to be sat at the front (Participant 6).

Conversely, Participant 6 reflected on how the school had been less accommodating of her son benefiting from a later start to the school day.

> The flexible start time would help him, so when he was in the [behaviour] unit and because he wasn't in the mainstream, it wasn't an issue. I used to take him in when he was up and ready, and it worked because he wasn't getting into a struggle, and he wasn't getting sent home. When I was getting him to school on time, there were many arguments at home because I had to get him up at seven to be ready to get the bus to school. So, because he wasn't sleeping properly, the extra time that he had in bed and going in a bit later helped, and it took the stress off, but they won't accommodate him (Participant 6).

Degrees of citizen power: partnership

Rung six is "partnership", where power is redistributed through negotiation mechanisms for resolving impasses. Participant 10 had negotiated with her son's school that he stayed in the "library for the day" when he received a fixed-term exclusion because having him at home was "impossible". She reflected that this was probably because the school were aware of the disabilities her other children had; they were an independent school and, as such, had more resources and because her son also had a dedicated one-to-one.

> They did listen, and they were very good because they knew the disabilities my other children have. But I expect they did that because they are independent; a local authority school would probably say no to us. But the school staff said, "We will keep him in the library today with his one-to-one." And because Trystan had a one-to-one, that was possible because they have a

> staff member for him. And I imagine if your child doesn't have the specialist needs and a one-to-one, then who would they find to stay with the child in the library? (Participant 10).

Participant 11 explained that because she "worked in education", she had "more voice" but reflected that "most parents aren't in that position." Although she was able to work in partnership with school staff, it was a challenging process. She felt that if she had not had the knowledge she had gained through working in education, her son's fixed-term exclusions would be "through the roof." She explained that her son attended a school where professionals felt "parents don't have value in many cases." She described how internal exclusions were not an effective sanction for her son because he did not learn from the experience. A restorative session was helpful for the child and the teacher to understand what had led up to a behavioural incident.

> I phone his head of the Base.[2] And I say, "do a restorative", because that's what he will learn from; he will not learn if you stick him in a room in isolation. He'll learn from a restorative[3] approach. It is helpful from the child's point of view and the teacher's understanding of what led up to it (Participant 11).

Degrees of citizen power: delegation and citizen control

Although participants described examples of "partnership" in the citizen control domain, there were no examples of rung seven, "delegation", where citizens have delegated power to make some decisions, and rung eight, "citizen control", where citizens have complete managerial control. However, there was an example of citizen power within the data. Participant 3 spoke of attending a consultation meeting as part of an inspection of his son's school. They felt it was not a fair representation of parents as the parents who attended the consultation were teachers, teaching staff or school governors. Participant 3 spoke of being "shouted down" by these parents, demonstrating that these parents involved in the school had more voice and power than he did.

Discussion and conclusion

Nonparticipation: manipulation

The results showed that most parents' experiences of participation were in the nonparticipation and degrees of tokenism categories at the bottom of Arnstein's (1969) ladder. In answering research question one, whether the parents of children at risk of exclusion felt meaningfully involved in the school exclusion process, the data showed clear examples of "manipulation" in the nonparticipation domain. Parents gave examples of school staff not communicating with them until it was too late to influence decisions. This reflects the findings of Feingold and Rowley's (2022) study, where parents felt that they were not listened to, and this led to them feeling that they had no power or control.

The data showed another example of manipulation when parents were told the only alternative to a permanent exclusion was a managed move. The Welsh Government's (2019, p. 11) guidance suggests managed moves as an alternative to exclusion but clarifies that parents should never feel pressured to agree to a managed move under the threat of a permanent exclusion (Welsh Government, 2019).

Nonparticipation: therapy

The therapy domain was helpful in explaining that parents felt that school staff had just wanted to "cure" participants' children of their negative behaviour rather than making reasonable adjustments that could help them succeed in education. Parents spoke of school staff not recognising that their children had support needs, and if these support needs were met, this could prevent the behaviour that led to exclusions. Instead, parents felt the school staff simply victimised and blamed their children. The Welsh Government guidance (2019) in place at the time of the interviews was clear that excluding a learner with a protective characteristic is unlawful if a learner without a protective characteristic would not be excluded. The results showed that parents felt that their children had been unfairly excluded because their disruptive behaviour had been a result of unmet support needs.

Degrees of tokenism: informing

The results showed that parents felt that school staff were unwilling to listen to them, and meetings to discuss their children's behaviour gave them "superficial information" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 219). Parents felt that school staff put more effort into pushing them away than listening to their expertise on the best way to support their child. This could reflect the findings of the Timpson review (DfE, 2019), which found that there could be a culture of blame between families and schools, with some parents reporting that school staff felt their child's behaviour was a result of their parenting.

Degrees of tokenism: consultation

The results showed that one parent had attended a consultation exercise. He described being unable to participate and felt that he was "shouted down" at every opportunity. He described the other parents who attended the consultation exercise as having more power because they were school staff or governors. Canadian research that examined parents' involvement in school councils found that when principals supported parents' involvement, it increased their confidence and sense of efficacy (Stelmach, 2016). This could explain why parents with dual roles at the school felt more empowered to participate in the consultation exercise as they were supported by the principal in their other role.

Degrees of tokenism: placation

The results showed that one parent had experienced placation. They reflected that school staff had been supportive of not sitting her son in the front of the classroom but not supportive of him having a more flexible start time to school. She felt both these accommodations were reasonable adjustments because her son had been diagnosed with ADHD. This example shows placation as this parent could influence some decisions but not others.

Degrees of citizen power: partnership

In answering research question two, whether parents of children at risk of exclusion have the power to influence decisions in the school exclusion process, the results showed that

two parents had the power to influence decisions in the school exclusion process, and they felt this had reduced the number of exclusions their children had received. One participant felt she had more power because her son attended a private school, and they had more resources to support him. Another participant felt because she worked in education, she had more voice, and without her knowledge of the education system, her son's fixed-term exclusions would be higher. This reflects research by Stelmach (2016, p. 273) that a barrier to parents' participation in schools is the "inertia and intimidation created by educational hierarchies."

These parents were less intimidated by the education system because they had experience working in education, or their child was educated in a private school where the staff had more resources. This could also be because these parents are middle-class (Reay, 2017). As discussed earlier in this paper, Reay (2017) highlights that working-class families will not have the confidence of middle-class families, who are more likely to have had positive experiences in the education system.

Degrees of citizen power: delegated power & citizen control

The results showed no examples of participants experiencing delegated power or citizen control in the school exclusion process, the top two rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder. This reflects Stelmach's (2016) research on school councils, which found that although there were degrees of citizen power, with partnership being most evident, this was the least common type of participation. Partnership could be the most appropriate form of citizen power in the school exclusion process, where parents could give advice and influence decisions; the data from this study showed that parents felt that this could reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions. Delegated power would give parents dominant decision-making power, and citizen power would be a community-owned school which parents control. In the comprehensive Welsh education system, partnership is probably the most appropriate highest level of citizen power.

Research question three asked if Arnstein's (1969) ladder provided a valuable framework to explore parents' understanding of the school exclusion process and whether it gives a more substantiative understanding of the issues parents face during the exclusion process. Arnstein's (1969) typology provides a valuable lens through which to explore parents' participation in the school exclusion process, but it also presents an oversimplification of the participation process. In her seminal article on the ladder of citizen participation, Arnstein (1969) acknowledges that her typology is a simplification but suggests that it is still helpful to illustrate the significantly different degrees of citizen participation and understand if citizen participation is meaningful. While Arnstein's (1969) ladder was useful for exploring parents' perceptions of power, the framework has limitations. Arnstein (1969, p. 217) explained that the typology does not include the roadblocks to achieving genuine levels of participation for powerholders, including "racism, paternalism and resistance to power distribution."

Moreover, hooks (2014) highlights that coming to voice is about telling one's experience and thinking critically to challenge and confront. In a repressive education system where class advantage and disadvantage are perpetuated, middle-class parents may feel more entitled to speak and for their voices to be heard (hooks, 2014). Perhaps what is needed, particularly in light of the overrepresentation of children with ALN,

black and minority ethnic groups and young people in receipt of FSM, as previously mentioned, is independent advocates who can work with parents to help them come to voice as they already have a voice but power alignments in the education system are limiting their impact and influence (hooks, 2014).

It is recommended that the Welsh Government examine the effectiveness of current advocacy services and explore if there are any gaps in provision. Civil society organisations that already deliver services should be consulted to determine what funding and support they need to scale up their current provision, and it should also be examined if new services are needed.

Conclusion

This research examined school exclusion in Wales, focusing on the experiences of parents whose children had been excluded from school. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation was used to explore parents' involvement in the school exclusion process. The data showed that most parents' involvement in the school exclusion process could be categorised at the bottom of Arnstein's (1969) ladder as nonparticipation, as parents highlighted significant challenges communicating with school staff. Most parents felt uninformed and powerless and believed that if they had been involved earlier, they could have prevented behavioural issues from escalating.

Moreover, this research suggests that not all parents have equal power to influence the school exclusion process, raising questions about which parents are being heard. Greenaway-Clarke and Franklin (2023) suggest that independent advocacy is a powerful tool, and advocates could work with parents to support them in the school exclusion process and ensure their voices are heard. This research highlights the need to ensure all parents meaningfully participate in the exclusion process to ensure there is a fairer and more inclusive education system in Wales.

Notes

1. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.
2. Some mainstream schools in Wales have a Base or a unit where they hold classes for pupils with ASD. Pupils access some mainstream classes but are educated in the Base for the rest of the time.
3. Restorative practice involves the pupil meeting with the people who have been affected by their actions and explaining the impact that their actions have had. It encourages pupils to take responsibility for their actions and allows school staff to understand what led to negative behaviour.

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Ethical approval

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