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Young peoples' experiences of exclusion from school in the political economies of the four UK jurisdictions

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ABSTRACT

The data in this article were gathered as part of a larger study of school exclusion in the four jurisdictions of the United Kingdom (UK). Key points of investigation involved attempting to understand why there were disproportionately higher official school exclusions in England, in terms of temporary and permanent exclusions, compared to the rest of the UK and an exploration of informal or unofficial forms of exclusionary practices. Education in each jurisdiction of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) is devolved and there are different legislative and policy arrangements in place. In this paper, we consider young peoples' experiences of exclusion in what are ultimately different cultural contexts. We were minded that disability needs to be understood within the settings in which it is experienced and is thus cultural, contextual and fluid. Young people were interviewed, and vignettes illustrating experience were constructed and a coding frame was developed. We have presented the outcomes of the analysis organised by individual themes across jurisdictions. Our conclusions suggest that experience may not be as contextually labile as expected, rather that incidence was a more salient factor. Exclusion is not a pleasant experience although it is more common in some settings than others.

Introduction

Recently McCluskey, Riddell, and Weedon (2015) reported that:

> young people's experience is highly variable; that inappropriate curricula are still common, pastoral support uneven and that few opportunities exist for success or re-integration. In the most disturbing examples, young people were found to have experienced physical restraint and the use of isolation as punishment (McCluskey, Riddell, and Weedon 2015, 595)

One of the most commonly reported findings is that to be found in Pomeroy (1999, 480) who identifies the importance of the teacher – pupil relationship to young people's experience and understanding of their place in school. This suggestion is to be found in many other sources. It is in the everyday interactions of schooling that so much of the identity work of schooling takes place (see also Melkman 2024). Parsons (1996), takes this line of argument somewhat further in that he engages with the impact of exclusion on all participants and importantly on the institutions in which they are located:

> When exclusions take place it is well established that there is considerable distress to children, their families and also the schools concerned. Similarly, the role of competition and selection in producing social exclusion is not limited to its effect upon the lives of those who become its most obvious `victims'. Social exclusion affects and implicates us all. (Parsons 1996, 107)

Given the range and diversity of the services, which are often involved in practices of exclusion, it has been noted that perverse incentives may be witnessed and conflicts may arise between professionals and young people, and their parents may experience contradictory, confusing and debilitating tensions and contradictions in the guidance they are offered and the interventions that they receive (Daniels, Thompson, and Tawell 2019).

There have been a number of studies of the experiences of specific groups of young people (e.g. Boyd (2021); Brede et al. (2017); Demie (2021); Osler and Vincent (2003); and Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane (2017)). Common features in their experiences included difficulties with aspects of the school environment, problems with staff–pupil relationships, lack of understanding of needs and consequent lack of appropriate provision which gave rise to conflicts between schools and parents.

Caslin (2021) felt that the young people with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties (SEMH) she interviewed felt that they were viewed as a 'culprit rather than a victim' and she concludes that young people continue to be framed as 'the problem rather than having problems'. The title of Parker et al. (2016) paper includes this phrase 'he was excluded for the kind of behaviour that we thought he needed support with'. This points to an overarching problem with a lack of recognition of educational need.

Porter (2015) argues disability needs to be understood within the settings in which it is experienced and is thus cultural, contextual and fluid. This understanding of disability rests on an understanding of experience. The same must surely be true of exclusion. In our analysis, we highlight that many of the young people in each jurisdiction reported having been either formally diagnosed with or were in the process of being diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disability and in particular attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and some make an association with this and why they were excluded from school or presented challenging behaviours in the classroom.

With this in mind, we now move to a discussion of the data from interviews of young people conducted in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In this article, we present the cross-jurisdictional study. The analysis section presents data from five thematic areas in which young people from schools and alternative provision describe issues associated with (i) rights and fairness, (ii) the types of interventions that schools or alternative providers used to prevent exclusion and manage behaviour (iii) the importance of positive relationships, (iv) diagnosis that impacts on learning, behaviour and associated additional support needs and lastly young people's (v) accounts of schooling including the transitions from primary to post-primary and for some the transition mainstream provision to alternative provision.

The study

As far as we are aware, this is the first time that a comparative study of experiences of exclusion on the part of young people has been conducted across the jurisdictions of the UK, all of which are outlined in Table 1 below. In the first instance, we recruited young people with experience of school exclusion through 30 mainstream schools involved in our study across the UK, which we referred to as *core schools*, however not all schools offered young people to be interviewed. In some contexts such as Northern Ireland and Scotland, while all core schools were approached, schools which had historically low numbers of temporary exclusions sometimes felt that they were not in a position to offer any young people at the time. As a consequence, in each jurisdiction, we also made contact with external alternative providers. As the landscape of alternative provision is different (see Power et al. 2024) in each jurisdiction, there were some divergences in terms of approaches to recruitment, for

Table 1. Numbers of interviews of young people conducted in each jurisdiction.

	Young People with Experience of Exclusion	Young People's Educational Context
England	15 10 male & 5 female	3 permanently excluded pupils in External AP 1 in Pupil Referral Unit 1 involved in a managed move 11 in mainstream (1 attended internal AP)
N. Ireland	16 12 male & 4 female	8 in mainstream 7 in EOTAS provision 1 not in education, training or employment
Scotland	9 6 male & 3 female	2 in mainstream 5 in AP but also attended core schools 2 recruited through wider professional contacts
Wales	16 12 male & 4 female	7 in mainstream (all attended internal AP) 4 in EOTAS (PRU) 1 in AP (Training Centre) 4 in AP (Youth Club)

example, the research team in Wales also contacted youth sector sources and local authorities. In Northern Ireland, the research team purposively recruited from a single Education Other than at School (EOTAS) centre and in England, two external alternative providers were approached directly. In Scotland, the research team also reached out to youth work provers and third sector organisations. It is also important to note that recruitment took place as schools recovered from closure and phased return after the COVID pandemic.

The research team developed schedules for young person interviews. These were progressively refined over time, prior to being piloted, and the core questions agreed upon were reflective of the disciplines and interests represented in the project. The final schedule contained nine core questions with various prompts built within each question. Thematically this involved: (i) the young person's reflections of schooling since primary, (ii) experiences and events that led to exclusion, (iii) the process of being excluded, (iv) education while they were excluded or in alternative provision, (v) returning to school after an exclusion, (vi) the impact of exclusion on the family, (vii) if an exclusion was fair, (vii) aspirations after leaving school and (ix) how reflections of exclusion might help other young people.

Interviews took place between July 2022 and February 2023, and the recordings were transcribed. Each jurisdiction team used a nudge sheet developed by the whole team to develop vignettes based on each interview. Once all the vignettes had been developed, each jurisdiction developed a coding frame which allowed for all issues and features from that jurisdiction to be captured. A subsequent workshop developed a superordinate coding frame which was then applied to all the vignettes. The following themes, presented in Table 2, were distinctly common across all four jurisdictions and are presented below:

Table 2. Analysis themes.

Theme No.	Theme Headings
1	Rights, fairness, appropriateness & justice
2	The types of interventions used to prevent exclusion or manage behaviour
3	Relationships (which had two sub themes) • *Relationships with teachers* • *Relationships with peers*
4	Diagnosis that impacts on learning, behaviour and additional support needs.
5	Pupils accounts of schooling • *Accounts of primary school* • *Accounts of mainstream secondary* • *Transitions (primary – secondary & secondary – alternative provision)*

Analysis

Rights, fairness, appropriatness and justice

Although some young people described their exclusions as fair, the data raised several issues around rights, fairness, appropriateness and justice. These issues fell into three related categories; listening and participation, unfairness, inconsistency and labelling, and access to education.

Listening and participation

Our data raises questions about how far young people at risk of exclusion are able to access meaningful participation. Young people across all jurisdictions shared a sense of not being listened to, which led to feelings of frustration and anger. Sometimes this was due to being explicitly ignored, for example, by not being allowed to speak in meetings:

> They wouldn't even listen. They'd just cut me off when I was speaking . . . I'd be in a meeting with them, and I was trying to speak to them, and that's what got me so angry . . . They wouldn't let me speak.
>
> (Osian, Wales)

Many young people said that unjust exclusions were a result of not consulting or hearing their point of view, not believing them, or not having proper evidence. Sophie (England) was initially excluded for vaping even though 'nothing was found on me', and after parental involvement, the exclusion was reduced to one day due to new evidence. Sophie, however, was more upset about not being believed.

In other cases, although young people ostensibly had opportunities to give their view, they implicitly understood that they would not be meaningfully listened to:

> Obviously, like, I still did get suspended, like there's nothing you can dae about it. Like, see if they say you're getting suspended, you're getting suspended. (Keir, Scotland)

Similarly, young people sometimes said that they did not feel able to speak freely in readmission meetings because of the potential for further exclusions.

Unfairness, inconsistency and labelling

Young people across all four jurisdictions said they had experienced unfair treatment.

Commonly, young people said it was unfair that they received harsher treatment or were more likely than others to be excluded for similar behaviour to their peers. Young people often recounted this happening after fights between pupils in which both young people had been hurt, when one young person was excluded and the other was not. One young person, Peter (England), recalled that during an altercation between him and a boy who threatened, 'Next time I see you out, I'm going to stab you', the school 'dealt with [the other young person] under the radar', while Peter got suspended.

Young people described feeling singled out for exclusion and being blamed for incidents that were not their fault. Young people felt that they had been labelled as the 'naughty kids in school', as Aeron explained.

> 'It's not always all your fault. I used to get into a couple of fights, and I remember. Nick, he f*****g hit me, and I hit him back; I'm the one that got excluded, and he didn't. They assumed I started it when I didn't.' (Aeron, Wales)

This further underlines the importance of schools seeking all sides of a story before excluding and being willing to act on what they hear (see 'listening and participation').

Sometimes young people also made associations between fairness and inconsistent application of the school rules more broadly, highlighting that they were treated differently from other young people. One young person argued that they were suspended for wearing a non-uniform coat but that others who similarly breached rules on uniform were not, and that young people who typically

did not infringe on the school rules were not subject to the same types of sanctions, implying that prior breaches of the rules increased the likelihood of further exclusions:

> 'I got annoyed about it
>
> cause a white coat doesn't hurt, it doesn't affect anyone's physical or mental wellbeing [. . .] I think it's petty [to suspend] is because, you know, the school will tell me that everyone gets treated the same. But I see all these people that don't cause any issues at all for the school and they're getting around in these big blue coats and these big yellow coats. You know, if they're still wearing them from the start of the day to the end, then I'm not able to wear a white coat, what's the difference?
>
> (Fionn Northern Ireland)

Access to education

Young people's accounts underlined that exclusion impacted their access to education. They recounted various informal exclusionary practices, from being removed from the classroom to being sent home without being formally excluded. Some of this practice may be accounted for in school policies and often referred to in different ways such as internal practice or informal exclusion. However, at times, these forms of exclusion are unofficial, unrecorded and unlawful, such as being sent home for the rest of a school day. As these forms of exclusion are not officially recorded, we are not able to quantify the extent of this practice and this problem has been identified by Daniels, Porter, and Thompson (2022) but we are confident that this practice is prevalent across the UK based on the emerging findings from the wider UK study.

Young people highlighted the educational impact of being out of class. One said that having a part-time timetable 'did actually kind of help me' but that he 'wasn't getting enough education' (Ted, Scotland). Another pointed out that when she was internally excluded she was not given the same work as her peers. Those who were out of class to attend organised support for learning generally described it as a good thing, in contrast with those who felt they had been excluded.

Some young people in England and Northern Ireland said that exclusions were often not justified by the severity of the behaviour:

> 'They [pupils] get excluded for like the silliest things' (Jenny, England)

Decisions to exclude were deemed to be *'nit-picking'* or *'petty'* and as a response to trivial things, especially minor infringements of the school rules. One young person explained:

> I'd come in wearing the wrong shoes they would have suspended me . . . when I had my piercings and all, they'd suspend me for a week until I'd taken it out. (Tina, Northern Ireland)

For others, temporary exclusions could be *'too harsh'* and overly long for breaches of the rules such as vaping, which in some schools incurred a suspension of five days, whereas in others, vaping could result in an internal suspension or a much shorter official suspension such as one day.

Young peoples' perspectives on the types of interventions used to prevent exclusion or manage behaviour

School-based interventions

Across the four jurisdictions, young people described a range of interventions that their schools used to prevent exclusion or to manage their behaviour. Many of these interventions appeared to be common practice. Interventions such as: modified timetables; the use of *'time-out cards'* or *'report cards'*; internal forms of exclusion where young people were removed from the classroom for varying amounts of time to dedicated spaces or placed with dedicated staff; readmission meetings or back to school meetings (sometimes involving parents); and working with school staff or representatives from external services on emotional and behaviour management and conflict resolution. Young people also talked about

alternative provision as a type of intervention that was used, and we will return to this later in this section.

Young people across the four jurisdictions talked about the efficacy of interventions in two ways: interventions with limited or no impact and interventions that appeared to work or had a positive impact.

Interventions with limited impact

In England, some of the young people argued that formal exclusions, mostly associated with being sent home, were ineffective especially in contexts where a young person might be in a cycle of exclusions;

> 'When they suspended me [. . .] it was basically rewarding me with not letting me come to school,' and Roy said: 'I just, I came in . . . get suspended, go home, come back [. . .] change the way you exclude to something else, because the way they exclude, it's just meaningless'. (Robert, England)

In Wales, Aiden spoke of alternative provision including riding motorbikes and outdoor activities he had enjoyed, but he felt they had not helped prevent him from being excluded. In Northern Ireland, the use of back to school meetings was common but for some young people, these could be intimidating, Jamie explained: *'It's like all people in the school are just sitting there in front of you. They would just like threaten to expel me and stuff, and it was just like intimidating.'* Young people also questioned the efficacy of internal forms of exclusion. Linford from Northern Ireland explained:

> It's quite boring [. . .] You sit in three rooms throughout six hours and then you get no break, no lunch, you sit. [. . .] you just get brought there, sit at the desk and at the end of the day you just leave. (Linford, Northern Ireland)

Furthermore, a number of the young people in Northern Ireland talked disparagingly about external service providers such as social workers, CAHMS and behavioural support provided by the Education Authority. Sue explained: *'I've been in CAMHS for five years [. . .] it 'did not work very well.'* In terms of engaging with social workers, three young people who had been referred to EOTAS talked about having negative experiences of social workers. Rachel said: *'I had like four social workers and they were all w**kers [. . .] Not one of 'em helped.'*

The same issue was witnessed in the Welsh data.

Interventions that had a positive impact

Across the four jurisdictions, young people also talked about positive practice. In particular, they described elements of alternative provision or EOTAS that appeared to be beneficial. The landscape of alternative provision differs across the UK (See Power et al. 2024); young people described various forms including attending units within schools and attending forms of alternative provision outside of school. In some cases, this was part-time provision and in other cases attending alternative provision on a full-time basis. Others described forms of alternative provision that were sports based or youth work based or associated with outdoor activities. Despite these different forms of alternative provision, common themes have emerged. Young people pointed to the benefits of smaller class sizes; more positive relationships with providers and teachers, compared to those in mainstream, and in particular being in environments where there was more support and where they felt that the adults were more empathetic. Ellie from Wales talked about attending therapeutic rugby intervention, which she described as the best support she had ever received:

> I loved it. It was sick . . . out of all the support I've ever had, they were literally the best . . . If I was struggling with something (they) brought someone in who had experienced the same thing to speak to me, it was so nice. (Ellie, Wales)

Also from Wales, Aeron explained:

> I can get on with my work, and if I need to, I can have a break. I can go outside now. I like going outside and just taking a chill before coming back in. It's a lot easier down here because there are only four or five of us in one class; I've been up there where there are like 30 and one teacher. (Aeron, Wales)

Similarly, Tom from Northern Ireland commented on the nurture classroom he attended, explaining that it *'had helped a lot [there were] less people, so less distractions.'* In Scotland, in comparison with mainstream schools, alternative provision was described as *'fun, exciting', 'less noisy'*, and *'peaceful'* and similarly Tina, from Northern Ireland described mainstream school as 'controlling,' and 'like jail' She said:

> 'You don't get controlled as much You're basically allowed to do stuff you wouldn't do in mainstream. You still get taught the same, you're taught better. Seeing you feel more compassionate about a school, in a school you feel good in, you're more likely to do your work better; you're more likely to listen to what the teachers are saying. In the other school you wouldn't listen to what the teachers were saying because you didn't feel happy in it.' (Tina, Northern Ireland)

Relationships

The importance of relationships with teachers and peers was evident in young people's accounts across the jurisdictions.

Adults

Most young people felt that some teachers' language, tone, volume (shouting), attitude and insensitivity could trigger intense reactions and have punitive outcomes. One young person from Scotland reflected that, *'if teachers are giving me attitude, I do attitude back on them, cause I feel like it's unfair, and I'm just getting moaned at sometimes for no reason.'* For another, a teacher remark caused a reaction that got him excluded when informing a peer that he would be attending a family member's funeral:

> 'No one's bothered, we don't want to hear what you're talking about' so that proper like wound me up . . . and I went a little ballistic . . . and I got excluded.' (Robert, England)

When describing negative relationships in Northern Ireland, young people highlighted teachers who 'shouted,' 'went on and on,' were 'feared,' were unsympathetic, didn't show 'respect,' used 'power' or double standards:

> 'In here's like . . . Some of the teachers in here, obviously I won't say who it is, but like see with certain clothes now, like they wear, like this wee girl was coming in here and I was like, why has she not been told all day, like anything? And she was like, "it's because you have a completely different body shape and size from her. That's why she can wear it." That's what was said to me in front of her.' (Tina, Northern Ireland)

A theme in the data for young people permanently excluded in Wales was that they did not have strong relationships with adults in mainstream education, reflecting a lack of trust, safety, belonging and care:

> They just didn't make you feel a part of the school. It was all too big in the head. (The teachers) thought that they were better than everyone else. (They should make sure) that people in the school are okay and safe, but they don't . . . they just say that just to get their money and go home.
>
> (Ieuan, Wales)

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Where young people described positive relationships with adults in Scotland, they often said these adults were *'calm'* and *'peaceful', 'just talk to you like a human being'*. Feeling comfortable with and supported by their AP

teachers was expressed in Wales. Pupils in Northern Ireland and England described EOTAS teachers that were *'supportive'*, that they *'could talk to,'* and those that *'understand'* pupils, who had a positive effect on attendance and learning:

Young people in England, on more than one occasion, expressed the need for connection with trusting adults that they can talk to:

> Like you could do with a lot more, but all you need is one real person, whether it's a teacher or a family member, who you can talk to openly. (Roy, England)

Peers

The data showed that most of the young people had good school friends and felt that they were well-liked, highlighting the impact of friendships on experiences of school: *'When you have mates, it doesn't matter what school you're in.'* (Louise, England)

Sometimes young people described friendships as keeping them in school:

> I think having good pals as well . . . that want you to stay in the school and want you to do well . . . they want you there, and it makes you feel, like, bad for them if you're not there (Leah, Scotland)

Some young people referred to the challenges of avoiding negative peer influence. One young person in mainstream school in Northern Ireland referred to his peer group as the 'messers,' a group of mates that 'always mess.' Reflecting on his future behaviour after having experienced numerous exclusions, Peter (England) said, *'I'm sort of seeing me getting into trouble like mixing with other people and then getting a bit carried away and then getting into trouble.'*

Young people frequently talked about being bullied or in conflict with some peers, needing school interventions that resulted in various forms of exclusion or leaving school for another:

> It was just about my clothes and all [in their original school] here [NI] it was like different, racist and all and I was angry, I was pissed. I was thinking to like do something to me like, to hurt myself because I was depressed for a couple of months because they were doing it every single day when I was coming to school like [. . .] [H]e [principal] suspended the wee lad and the wee girl who was who was bullying me. (Leo, Northern Ireland)

The lack of effective school interventions to resolve peer conflicts led some young people to take matters into their own hands, in the form of fighting or bringing weapons to school for self-defence, in response to bullying, goading or teasing:

> . . . got fed up with the bullying . . . I got, I brought a knife into school . . . and I was just gonna use it, like, just to scare the guys that were bullying me, I wasn't actually gonna use it to do anything.
>
> (Ted, Scotland)

Diagnosis that impacts on learning, behaviour and additional support needs

The data showed that young people faced various barriers to learning and had often lacked sufficient support to overcome these challenges, including those related to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autistic spectrum condition (ASC). In England, of the 15 young people who were interviewed, seven said they had been diagnosed with ADHD and/or learning-related difficulties such as dyslexia, including two with ASC. Four participants reported no learning challenges, but those without learning differences tended to face exclusion due to social-emotional and behavioural challenges. In Scotland, five young people described themselves as having or being in the process of, being diagnosed with ASC or ADHD. Of the 16 young people who were interviewed in Northern Ireland, a quarter of them talked about being formally diagnosed or were in the process of being diagnosed. While some described taking medication, others talked about attending special schools at the primary level because of autism. Of the 16 participants in Wales, only two reported having an additional learning need (ALN).

In England, young people diagnosed in primary school struggled the most in secondary school. However, support generally led to improved outcomes. For example, Jenny had her first exclusion in primary school due to her *'anger,' 'lashing out,'* and *'naughtiness.'* When Jenny received pastoral care and mentoring support, her behaviour and academic performance improved significantly. Autism diagnoses presented unique challenges, particularly for Liam, who was diagnosed with ASC when he was seven, *'and i was still waiting to be assessed for ADHD and additional support.'* Liam explained that he worked best with one-to-one support, but his school had *'funding issues'* and *'not enough'* staff to provide this. Similarly, in Wales, Osian who had been diagnosed with ADHD described how he *'wanted one-to-one'* support but explained that although he struggled with his work, his difficulties were perceived as behavioural rather than academic.

A common theme in the data from Wales was that young people identified that they needed more support with mental health difficulties. Participants explained that the incident that led to their exclusion stemmed from a lack of mental health support. Ellie considered it evident that she needed support with her mental health as she had *'breakdowns'* in school. Ieuan described wanting to *'talk to someone'* about his sister's death, acknowledging that he was struggling. Power, Bridgeman, and Taylor ([2024](#)), drawing on the same data, highlighted that young people in Wales presented their actions as rational and a response to their situation rather than drawing on discourses of vulnerability.

Some young people in all jurisdictions who were excluded, sometimes for several weeks, could receive no schoolwork. For those who were provided with work, challenges such as technological issues, a lack of targeted support, and insufficient adult assistance made it challenging to keep up. Many of these young people had experienced multiple temporary exclusions, which likely negatively affected their learning (Klein, Sosu, and Dare [2022](#)), especially since their additional support needs were often unmet. Conversely, some young people reported that working in settings outside of traditional classrooms, such as in alternative provision, at home, or online, had been beneficial for their learning.

The benefit of working in a different learning environment was echoed in Northern Ireland. Josh described leaving mainstream primary and attending a special school for autism but described this positively; he said, *'For the most part, it was far better because I just enjoyed it more, and people around me were far easier to talk to because they were the same as me.'* In Northern Ireland, young people reported improvements in behaviour because they started taking medication for ADHD. Jamie described how before he had received his medication for ADHD he was '*doing really bad stuff. But like, the medication calms me doing that.'*

Pupils accounts of schooling

Pupils' accounts of mainstream primary school across the four jurisdictions present a somewhat mixed picture. The sample sizes are small and this presents challenges in interpretation.

Primary school

In England, young people reported more positive experiences in primary school than in secondary school. They referred to the following factors as being influential on their judgements: more pastoral care; fewer teachers; flexibility; creative and active learning approaches; and having more time outdoors.

> I was good in primary school. I did all my work and stuff all the time. And it were just fun there as well because like, I don't know, it were just fun. I don't know. And you was allowed out at primary school, now we aren't even allowed outside.
>
> (Janet, England)

In Wales, five of the young people interviewed also reported positive experiences of primary school, and they reminisced about schooling being generally better. However, two pupils described difficult experiences in primary school as a consequence of their behaviour being 'bad' or that they had been bullied. James felt that primary school had been worse for him than secondary school, but he also described how he had been rugby tackled after pulling a pipe off the wall. He explained *'behaviour-wise (he) was worse in primary school.'* Carys explained that she had been pushed down the stairs in primary school.

In Scotland, two young people said they had enjoyed primary school and did well there. One said this was because *she 'just started misbehaving quite a lot'* at high school, while the other reflected that he had *'felt really connected'* at primary school because it was smaller. Others had difficulties at primary school due to being stuck in the same *'class all day with the same people'*, not having access to the specialist support available at high school, finding the work *'really, really hard'*, or not feeling liked or having friends.

In the data from Northern Ireland, some young people appeared to have had very disrupted primary experiences characterised by forms of exclusions, difficult relationships with teachers and peers, experiences of bullying and, for some, multiple moves between schools.

Secondary schools

In England having rigid rules and routines, being bored in challenging lessons and adapting to the diverse expectations of more teachers hampered young people's transition to secondary school (Bailey and Baines 2012). For Harold, *'primary school was all right, like I loved school!'* but he *'sort of lost interest'* in secondary school. Online work is sometimes too difficult, *'you don't really learn much because you didn't understand it because you couldn't ask the teacher for help could you?'*

> '[Mainstream school] "felt more like a jail" . . . . "set routines" . . . ' you've got to do this or do that' . . . . 'you're fitted to it'. (Robert, England)

In Wales all the young people who had been permanently excluded from school spoke of negative experiences of secondary school. They spoke of negative relationships with teachers and pupils, not feeling that they belonged, and not being listened to.

In Northern Ireland pupils reported struggles with the primary/secondary transition. Post-primary schools were spoken of as being *'much bigger'* and pupils struggled to adjust to moving between classes; there were *'more rules'*; teachers were *'stricter'* and some *'shouted.'* In some cases, young people described feeling isolated and did not know anyone. Some reflected that primary school was *'easier,' 'more relaxed', 'less strict'* and *'more comfortable.'* Collectively these may provide some insight into why some young found post-primary education challenging and were perhaps more at risk of exclusion.

Transition to alternative provision

Young people in England suggested that transition from secondary to alternative provision was smooth when they could gradually attend a few times a week, connect with peers on the first day, and have targeted interventions. Relating with teachers often inspired learning:

> 'I love English here .'; So I got on with him perfectly and I've excelled, you can see my books, I was writing full pages because . . . like he'd drag me into the point where I wanted to learn more.' (Roy, England)

In Wales young people who attended their school's internal alternative provision agreed that being educated in the mainstream had been 'boring'. Aeron was now being educated in the school's internal alternative provision. He said that mainstream lessons had been *'boring'* because they *'didn't do any work'* and that he would have been kicked out of school if they had not provided the alternative provision. Aeron felt there should be an internal alternative provision on every school site.

His classmates agreed that alternative provision was better on the school site because they could still attend some mainstream lessons and be with their friends.

Overall it would seem that accounts of primary school experience are generally more positive than those of secondary schools. Accounts of transitions to alternative provision do not show evidence of negative experience. Irrespective of the setting, the data suggest that smaller classes and stable positive relationships with teachers are preconditions for positive accounts of experience. There are also strong hints that teaching which is engaging and engaged is associated with positive experience.

Discussion

There were striking similarities between young people's accounts across all four jurisdictions, for example: negative impact of exclusion, feeling unfairly treated, and difficulties with peer relationships. Young people across the UK point to smaller class-sizes, and positive, supportive and empathetic relationships with experienced adults as interventions that may work in terms of reducing the likelihood of further exclusion and potentially re-engagement. The data presented in this paper, from the perspective of the young people, points to more positive learning, relational and well-being experiences in smaller, structured groups both in mainstream and in alternative provision. This type of educational provision appears to align with forms of nurture provision or nurture groups and while the evidence base offers a generally positive assessment of the effectiveness of nurture groups in terms of improving social and emotional outcomes (Jones, Wood-Downie, and Golm 2025; Sloan et al. 2020). Grantham and Primrose (2017) and Hughes and Schlösser (2014) emphasise that the evidence base in primary schools is more substantial, and while a growing number of post-primary schools in the UK are now implementing nurture groups, there is a need for more research in the post-primary context. Concomitantly, the evidence base that examines the relationship between nurture groups and prevention or reduction of exclusion is scant.

Many of the young people in this dataset appeared to have had a positive experience of alternative education in comparison to mainstream. However, we recognise that our sample, although cross-jurisdictional, is small and this limits the claims that can be made. It is also important to note that while comparisons between mainstream and alternative provision offer useful insight, we are not attempting to make claims regarding the efficacy of alternative provision compared to mainstream. Power et al. (2024) highlights the varied landscape of alternative provision across the UK and further study more aligned to themes associated with effectiveness is required.

The range of interventions described by young people across the UK was quite similar. However, many of the young people in the sample pointed to practice that they felt was ineffective in terms of reducing exclusion or reducing the risk of exclusion. Opportunities to continue to learn appeared to be negatively impacted, some exclusionary practice lacked structure and purpose other than acting as a temporary punitive measure. In the case of the use of restorative justice practices in schools such as various forms of circles, restorative conferences or conversations and mediation; while there is an evidence base which does point to effectiveness of restorative practices in terms of reducing or preventing exclusions (Samimi et al. 2023; Darling-Hammond et al. 2020; Lodi et al. 2021), there are others who offer important critical perspectives with McCluskey et al. (2008) questioning the direct translation of practice from the criminal justice field to education; a need for more intentionality and vigilance associated with the practice in schools (Schiff 2018) and inconsistencies in the literature in terms of defining and describing discrete practices of restorative practice in the general literature and a lack of evaluation and measurement of implementation in schools in what Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021) refer to as a 'train and hope' approach adopted in some schools. Schools in the current study frequently cited the use of restorative or reintegrative practices, but we have only a limited sense within the study whether schools had undertaken explicit or recognised training in restorative practices or merely espoused values and practices which they regarded as restorative. We

also have limited information on whether this type of practice was evaluated by the schools in terms of how effective it was in reducing exclusionary practice. Further research is required in this area.

The findings of this research highlight that young people were not listened to and treated unfairly in mainstream education. Young people across the jurisdictions explained that alternative provision was a better and more supportive learning environment for them than mainstream secondary school. More research is needed to examine the efficacy of alternative provision (Power et al. 2024). Moreover, it should also be examined if mainstream education environments can be better resourced to meet the needs of young people at risk of exclusion. As Caslin (2021) suggests, young people are viewed as being the problem rather than having problems. There is clearly a need for more supportive and flexible learning environments. Young people could benefit from the features of alternative provision such as smaller classes, more positive relationships with teachers, active learning approaches and more support in mainstream education.

The data indicated a correlation between a diagnosis of ALN, including ASC, and a higher risk of exclusion. However, more research is needed to explore this further. The data in all four jurisdictions showed the importance of addressing young people's educational challenges.

It is also difficult to see what the purpose of suspension was when young people were given no work or were unable to access the work that they were given due to technological issues. This meant that they would fall further behind in learning, which could lead to them feeling increasingly frustrated.

Perhaps, the most worrying finding is that young people felt they were not listened to in the school exclusion process. This was particularly the case when their peers were not subject to the same sanctions for the same behaviour. This could imply that they were labelled as troublemakers, and school staff were building a case for exclusion rather than supporting them. Excluding a young person from school is more than removing them from the school premises. It is how this removal shapes their understanding of justice, authority and their place in the education system and the wider world. When school staff fail to listen, when they apply rules inconsistently or look only at behaviour rather than addressing support needs, it perpetuates a system that fails both schools and young people.

The most striking finding based on the accounts of 56 young people was the theme of voicelessness. Young people in all the jurisdictions described being dismissed, silenced, or not believed. Perhaps, a new approach is needed where young people's difficulties in school are understood which emphasises the participation of young people and amplifies youth voice.

The quality of pupil–teacher relationships reported by young people indicate they are greatly affected by the quality of communication. Across all jurisdictions, young people referred to not being listened to, understood, believed and judged as communication barriers. Adult language that conveys anger (shouting), insensitivity, attitude and disrespect tend to set off defensive attitudes and escalates tensions that more often result in sanctions. Therefore, adults' ability to deescalate tensions, listen to young people's perspectives, understand the root of their distress, show warmth, care and interest in them as a person who needs compassion and guidance were qualities important to young people to develop trust and foster positive pupil–teacher relationships. These were characteristics most often mentioned as effective in young people's relationships with adults in both mainstream and AP environments. They are also supported by existing literature (Engles et al. 2016).

Every strained interaction between adults and young people potentially has a 50–50 chance of being resolved positively or negatively. Supporting and resourcing teachers and schools to strengthen relational practices can perhaps have a positive effect on building relationships with more challenged young people and strengthen their experience of connectedness, safety and belonging to school.

Peer relationships threatened by bullying, harassment and intimidation that were not effectively managed by school put young people at greater risk of harm as they tried to manage it on their own, often bringing weapons to school for protection. Therefore, the need for evidence-based bullying and conflict resolution interventions to improve peer to peer relationships was strongly evident. Transition from primary to post-primary appears to be a key point that could be more carefully

managed, especially for pupils who have already had experiences or presented behaviours associated with an increased risk of exclusion.

Conclusion

The most important overall conclusion is that whilst policy differences have been shown to make an impact on rates of exclusion, they have little or no impact on the experience of exclusion. We have highlighted some of the more prevalent experiences in this paper. More attention should be directed to the development of ways of reducing exclusion and its pervasive effects.

While this paper represents the voice of young people who have experienced exclusion from school, much more is required of the authors, the general academic community and policymakers who are focused on understanding the perspectives of young people in need. Emphasis should be on those interventions which have promise in terms addressing social, emotional and behavioural needs and which reduce the need for exclusion. Positive relationships, especially with adults, seem to be important to young people, and the evidence from this paper should encourage further investigation of the efficacy of nurture groups or nurture based provision in post-primary settings.

In terms of limitations, we acknowledge that the dataset is relatively small and so are mindful of the extent of the claims being made here. However, the cross-jurisdictional element of the study is of significant value and demonstrates similar findings across the four jurisdictions of the UK.

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