"Love, Care and Solidarity": Transforming School Exclusion Using an Abolitionist Lens

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Abstract

An abolitionist lens is applied to generate new understandings of school exclusion and to explore possibilities for its transformation. While framed within the literature as an issue of social justice and a driver within the school-to-prison pipeline, a gap remains in what it might mean to dismantle exclusion entirely and prefigure an education system that does not rely on punitive or exclusionary logics. Employing a politically engaged, qualitative methodology, two focus groups were conducted with community activists involved in anti-exclusion organising. The sessions were structured around a dual aim of deconstructing current exclusionary systems and imagining alternative structures through abolitionist world-building. Five overarching themes were developed through reflexive thematic analysis, tracing the historical, ideological, affective, and material conditions of school exclusion as well as the possibilities for resistance and transformation. Analytic interpretation was informed by feminist theory, disability justice, and critical psychology, exploring how exclusionary practices are produced and sustained through intersecting systems of power. Findings situate exclusion within a critical ecological framework, highlighting how resources, recognition, and care are differentially distributed and structurally constrained. Implications for educational psychology are outlined, including a re-politicisation of care and inclusion, and the development of a more justice-oriented and politically attuned way of working.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my dad and grandad, Mark and Cyril Ghent. You did not get to see me embark on this journey, but you have been with me every step of the way. I think you always knew I'd get here- even when I didn't.

Thank you to Dr Dale Bartle for your thoughtful guidance throughout this process, and for encouraging me to take up my authority during times of uncertainty.

To Qusai, *ya hayati*, this thesis would not have been possible without you. Thank you for holding things together while I slipped into autopilot. Thank you for caring for me, loving me, and never doubting me for a second.

Thank you to my sister, Kayleigh, for taking time out of your busy schedule to proofread some chapters. I am grateful for your and mum's support over the past 3 years.

Finally, I cannot end this thesis without acknowledging the immense privilege of being able to complete this doctorate and pursue further education. An opportunity which has been violently denied to so many children and students in Gaza. I dedicate this work to the children of Palestine. I bear witness to your suffering. You deserve to live, to learn, and to grow in freedom and dignity.

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Preface

"The whole damn system, shut it down"- a chant I recently heard at a march for Palestinian solidarity. This cry has continued to reverberate throughout my thoughts as I embarked upon writing this thesis. It is written during a time of insurmountable political instability, in which humanitarian crises rage throughout Palestine, Sudan, and The Democratic Republic of the Congo. Closer to home, we witness increasing hostile environment policies[1], attacks on trans rights[2], and an increasingly visible far-right presence. All of which has been plausibly facilitated by a political system which has spent years hijacking identity politics as a vessel for scapegoating the most vulnerable in our society.

Despite the anger and pain, these instances have sparked a defiant pushback against the government, state-mandated systems, and policies which enforce and maintain social inequality. Arguably primed by the uprisings reignited by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, recent years have witnessed mass mobilisations of community resistance and solidarity. Protesters have taken to the streets calling for racial, social, and political justice, collectively challenging state repression and inequality. An example of this solidarity is taken from the summer of 2024, in which anti-racists around the country linked arms to protect mosques and immigration centres against far-right pogroms. These acts constructed alternative infrastructures of care that did not rely on policing or the state. These movements have emphasised

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[1] Hostile environment policies refer to immigration policies which aim to restrict irregular migrants' ability to work and live without experiencing barriers (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021).
[2] In 2024 following the Cass Review the prescription of puberty blocker treatments for under 18s was ceased. This year the UK Supreme Court ruled that women's rights based on sex within the Equality Act (2010) do not include trans women.

the interconnectedness these of struggles, advancing understandings of their historical foundations and lifting "*the veil of secrecy*" on structural, systemic, and institutional injustice (Vahabzadeh, 2019, p. 39). Revealing that the system is functioning just as intended and that racism and division are not just unfortunate side effects of it.

But what does this have to do with Educational Psychology? I have witnessed conversations about these injustices seep into our team meetings, course tutorials, and supervisory spaces. We sit with the discomfort, we frown, we sympathise, and at times, we push back against it, but mostly, we carry on. Perhaps there's an element of feeling immobilised or overwhelmed by the prejudices and disparities we witness. Or maybe we don't know how to organise collective action against it. When it comes to schools, there is a consensus about the 'wicked problem' of school exclusion (Hallet & Hallet, 2021). However, it's a system in which we continue to participate- a system which systematically disadvantages certain students and perpetuates cycles of poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion (Demie, 2022). Disciplinary exclusion could be seen as a violent system which serves to discipline those who do not conform to dominant cultural and behavioural norms. At times, we are still seduced by individualist explanations and responses, explaining away systemic racism as a need for unconscious bias training or prescribing recommendations of emotional literacy interventions as a 'fix' all.

Instead, this research aligns itself with radical re-imaginings of schooling, critiquing school exclusion as a system that perpetuates institutionalised forms of harm. It is an invitation for the profession to take on a political task to deconstruct political power,

even where it is hidden or less visible (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, p. 41). Foucault states we must:

"criticise the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked so that one can fight against them."

Critical dialogue is essential to bring about social and structural change (Stovall, 2016). These ideas hope to plant radical seeds and inspire thinking outside the pre-existing structures of education and exclusion. This research refuses reforms that emerge from inequitable state systems and invites the reader to challenge patterns of thinking that have become engrained by state-sanctioned practices. At times, it might feel confronting, even antagonistic, but as invited by Angela Y. Davis (2014):

 "*You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time*".

This research takes up a position of disruptively deconstructing school exclusion whilst looking toward a landscape of transformative alternatives. The following pages of this thesis reflect an evolving research journey. Rather than returning to the introduction and smoothing things over through retrospective editing, they have been left as originally written. This choice captures the ways in which the tone and language used at the outset are situated in a deep sense of injustice which reflects the urgency and political outrage of the author. As the thesis progresses the reader

may observe a shift, not away from critique, but toward a reimagining which is rooted in love, care, solidarity, and collective possibility.

Importantly the concept of harm itself expands and evolves throughout the thesis. Initially framed in more individualised terms, as something enacted by schools or educators upon young people, harm is later defined and understood in more systemic and ecological ways. Throughout the research my analysis of harm was deepened by noticing the ways in which capitalism, neoliberalism and carceral logics shape not only the exclusion of children, but also harmed educators, families, and schools themselves. This shift allows for a more relational and structural account of harm that situates exclusion within those wider systems of violence. This evolution is not something which is incidental but reflects the unfolding argument between deconstruction to reconstruction. I begin by naming and confronting the violence embedded in system of exclusion and only by moving through this terrain with sustained criticality was it possible to arrive at a place of envisioning otherwise. The introduction stands as both a framing device and as an artefact of my evolving stance throughout the research, something which feels a necessary and meaningful part of the intellectual and political journey this thesis represents.

The research is shaped by the reality that exclusion in schools remains widespread and that many young people continue to experience schools not as sanctuaries but as sites of surveillance and control. This position not only emerges from the data, but from my experience as a professional working within education and witnessing the ways in which injustice seeps into practice, even within the most well-meaning settings. The approach taken toward this research reflects a commitment to

honouring the lived realities of those harmed by exclusion, while holding space for nuance and complexity.

At the same time, this critical stance does not preclude the acknowledgement of existing settings, practices, and groups which create emancipatory possibilities. These are schools, educators and community groups who resist exclusionary logics, build relationships rooted in care, and practice alternative approaches. For example, Schools Without Sanctions (Baker & Simpson, 2020) has pioneered whole-school approaches that reject punitive behaviour systems in favour of empathy, dialogue, and relational repair, offering real-time examples of how such frameworks can be applied in schools. I also recognise and value the many educators and staff who, often within constrained systems, are already doing the work of resisting, caring, and seeking alternative pathways. Your efforts to hold space for young people with dignity are seen and honoured here. In addition to acknowledging grassroots and community-based groups such as No More Exclusions, Kids of Colour, Akwaaba, Revoke, and Maslaha (to name a few) who are forging to collective responses to injustice within education and creating space for solidarity and resistance. Readers are encouraged to explore these examples and consider where their own practice sits within this wider landscape.

Introduction

1.2 Transformative Activist Stance

The research takes a Transformative Activist stance (Stetsensko, 2008), which confronts the fragmentation within sociocultural approaches and post-objectivist critical scholarship- not limited to the traditions of critical race theory, feminism, disability studies, critical pedagogy, Marxism, postcolonial theory, and post-structuralism. These approaches remain disconnected, making it challenging to compete with the positivist and empiricist trends that dominate research. Stetsenko recognises the common thread in critical approaches as uncovering the contexts of knowledge production, which are usually coupled with a commitment to social justice and emancipatory outcomes. This thesis traverses and integrates these critical standpoints to deconstruct the complexity of school exclusion and unravel ontological standpoints wrapped up in individualism and empiricism. It centres the historical, sociocultural, and socio-political context of school exclusion to paint an alternative narrative of school exclusion which is centred in critical thought.

The transformative activist stance goes beyond deconstruction to push for a scholarship rooted in social transformation and aspires to create alternative educational futures. It supersedes a 'descriptivist' position, which analyses power and resists injustice in the historical/present context. Instead, it pushes for a future-oriented agenda, highlighting how the future might be implicated in shaping the present (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2014). It is a dialectical approach emphasising that people are not just shaped by the social world but can transform it themselves. This

is viewed as a continuous process of change that involves contradictions and tensions, leading to new forms of activity and practice. Within this paradigm, the research does not just focus on coping in the context of an oppressive exclusionary system but works toward challenging and changing the system itself. It rejects a reformist stance that predicates that change must come about within current social structures and instead dreams up a world where school exclusion ceases to exist. A researcher positioning statement accompanies this stance and can be found in section 4.2.

1.3 Being Critical within Educational Psychology

Psychology is not neutral, value-free, or ahistorical. The focus of Educational Psychologists (EPs) work, even when guided by good intentions, has functioned politically concerning the kinds of gendered, racialised, and disabled populations targeted for scrutiny (Williams et al., 2017). While viewed as a helping profession, it has also been implicated in policing normalcy and gatekeeping access within education (Røn-Larsen, 2024). These are practices which are upheld by psychology's positioning as a scientific discipline (Hagstrom et al., 2007) and operate as part of the 'psy-complex', which refers to a set of powers and psychological assumptions which function to maintain normative values and power structures within society (Rose, 1989; Parker, 2018), positioning people within systems of governability (Nichterlein & Morss, 2017). This can be seen in how problems are often identified and located at the level of the individual, thereby obfuscating the systemic and political conditions in which they emerge (Gillborn & Delahunty, 2025).

Williams (2013) proposes that EPs have historically supported the smooth functioning of state institutions, reinforcing dominant ideologies through their involvement in processes such as labelling, assessment, and referral. In the context of exclusion, this can manifest through practices that reinforce behavioural norms, rationalise referrals to alternative provisions, or offer individualised interventions detached from structural critique. An argument is offered that the profession has unintentionally sustained exclusion by prioritising professional obligation over systemic challenge, offering within-child explanations even when practitioners themselves are deeply critical of the systems they work within (Done et al., 2021a).

At the same time, arguably prompted by the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020, there have been renewed calls for the profession to examine its historical complicity in unjust and exclusionary systems (Miller et al., 2021). A growing body of literature champions EPs as' agents of change' (Roffey, 2015) and drivers of social justice (Kuria & Kelly, 2023; Schulze, 2017). This shift requires a commitment to practice and research which resists siloed thinking that locates psychological work within narrow institutional constraints (Corcoran & Vassallo, 2024). Critical educational psychology centres on the social, political, and cultural contexts as starting points for critiquing psychology and developing more critically informed approaches to research (Parker, 2015). In turn, it strengthens the commitment to developing theory and practice, which resists oppressive systems and promotes psychosocial justice (Corcoran & Vassallo, 2024).

Whilst practitioners and researchers call on systemic and preventative ways of working concerning school exclusion (Bagley & Hallam, 2017). There remains a

need to critique and resist the normalisation of exclusion further by questioning the structures that sustain it. This is a call taken up in this thesis not by seeking reform but by applying abolitionist, critical and community psychology lenses, which work to reconstruct practice outside of its ideological foundations.

1.4 Taking a Critical Approach to Exclusion

Adopting a critical approach requires acknowledging that all knowledge is situated within ideological, cultural, political, and historical contexts (Vassallo 2017). It prioritises untangling knowledge from the dimensions of these power differentials, culturally situated interests, and dominant ideologies. It takes up the position that practices, systems, and institutions are never value-free but are bound by a host of contextual issues and assumptions. Though often defended as an unquestionable good (Allen, 2015), education operates within these dynamics and assumptions. Schools are a microcosm of society (Youdell, 2010), where societal practices and injustices are played out through organisational structures. Critical theory aids in challenging the status quo and furthering engagement with the shifting relations of power and oppression (Howarth, 2004). Understanding the political, ideological, and historical underpinnings upholding school exclusion better equips the profession to theorise and pursue alternative practices aligned with social justice and transformation.

Exclusion is embedded within a social structure where it is an ideological and normative concept of 'regular schooling' (Power & Taylor, 2020). Historically, it has been utilised as a method of social control, whether through incarceration,

institutionalisation, or banishment (Arnold, 2009). Today, it is openly practised through a criminal justice system that utilises punitive sanctions and imprisonment to solve social problems. Some suggest it is also enacted more covertly through social policy exclusion, in which racialised, working class and minoritised communities are shut out of social, political, economic, or cultural systems (Byrne, 1999). Although disciplinary exclusion was only formalised in education policy in 1986, exclusionary practices have long regulated access to education and pathologised those deemed unfit for mainstream schooling (Coard, 1971; Tomlinson, 1982). These practices continue within mainstream schooling today, albeit often obscured by neoliberal policy agendas (Parsons, 2009) and depoliticised discourses of inclusion (Slee, 2011) and reflecting a complex matrix of relationships between race, gender, and class, which shape who is included or excluded.

Education itself is theorised as a site of inequality, in which unequal hierarchies are reproduced through cultural and institutional mechanisms (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Exclusion has been proposed to operate as a tool within this cycle, exacerbating social and educational disadvantage (Gazeley, 2010) whereby exclusionary pathways, informed by classed assumptions and cultural biases, often lead to the de-prioritisation of academic learning, particularly for working-class children. Bourdieu (1991) proposes that schools reward social and cultural capital aligned with middle-class norms, while those who embody alternative forms of knowledge or expression are devalued or, in some cases, punished. These processes maintain social divisions and reinforce moral and cultural binaries of 'good' and 'bad', which underpin justifications for exclusion. These narratives might reflect the societal logic of punishment and control, in which specific individuals are

framed as inherently disruptive or deviant and deserving of punishment or segregation from society (Elliot-Cooper, 2021). As Taubman (2022) suggests, from a discursive perspective, school exclusion is legitimised through discourses of protection, civilisation, and human rights. Narratives which paint exclusion as just, and obscure some of the harm it enacts.

These dynamics are racialised as well as classed, in which school exclusion continues to disproportionately impact Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children most heavily. Authors have applied critical race theory to conceptualise this, which, in brief terms, proposes that racism is endemic to and engrained within laws, policies, and societal structures (Gillborn, 2008). It suggests that race is socially constructed as a means of governance, which reproduces inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Research on disproportional school exclusion points toward the operation of normative whiteness, processes of 'othering' (Bhopal, 2018), and institutional racism (Demi, 2019; Gillborn, 2008) which influence exclusionary practices and decision making.

Critical writings on school exclusion point toward patterns of inequality, which perhaps signal the extent to which exclusion is embedded within institutional principles, policy, and broader societal values that perpetuate and reproduce inequality. However, simply noticing these inequalities and injustices cannot be equated to dismantling the source in which they are used. Therefore, this research aims to go beyond reform and instead refuses the idea that exclusion is an acceptable form of practice. It argues for an approach that directly dismantles

systems of power and ideologically reconstructs practice outside of the current system.

1.5 An Abolitionist Framework

Youdell (2010) suggests that radical politics provide a helpful starting point for understanding education as a site of counter-political action. The project of abolition begins with a political vision focused on eliminating carceral systems and institutions of state coercion, namely prisons, policing, detention centres and borders. It demands dismantling systems with a vested interest in surveillance and punishment as solutions to social problems (DaViera et al., 2023)**.** These systems work to disappear problems rooted in inequality and oppression rather than addressing them at their root (Elliot-Cooper, 2021). State institutions such as prisons and policing are proposed as principal drivers of societal harm, exacerbating rather than ameliorating the social problems they claim to solve (Wilson Gilmore, 2007). Which in turn perpetuates cycles of inequity and harm for racialised and working-class populations. Abolition often integrates the theory of racial capitalism to understand these cycles, proposing that capitalism is an inherently racialised system which uses difference to justify the exploitation and disposability of specific populations (Robinson, 1983; Melamed, 2011). Under racial capitalism, those deemed surplus, whether due to poverty or systemic exclusion, are disproportionately subjected to criminalisation and imprisonment. This framing supports an understanding of how carceral logics extend beyond prisons into other domains of public life, including racialised punishment within education.

Developed through Black feminist traditions, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2018) emphasises that "*Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions.*" This refers to the need to critique carceral systems and transform them through the construction of social projects, institutions, and systems rooted in justice, care, and collective liberation (McLeod, 2015). Abolition is directly concerned with addressing harm by examining and responding to the structural conditions that produce it (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2022). This requires social change at every level, from addressing social and economic conditions that magnify inequality to building community-driven responses that focus on accountability, repair, and preventing harm in all forms (Sered, 2019). At times, this might involve arguing for non-reformist reforms[3], which reduce the power, scope, and legitimacy of carceral systems while creating space for new forms of care and safety (Day & McBean, 2022). When applying this to school exclusion, these shifts would not be about softening exclusion but transforming the framework through which harm is understood and addressed.

1.6 A Rationale for Applying Abolition to School Exclusion

Carceral geographies are sites for abolitionist struggle, an extensive landscape of places and spaces (both material and imagined) associated with the broader mechanisms of control, surveillance, and punishment (Shantz, 2017). These geographies extend beyond prisons and are embedded within wider social, economic, and political systems and reproduced through institutions such as schools (Wilson Gilmore, 2022). This is seen in the use of zero-tolerance behavioural

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[3] Also known as abolitionist reforms.

policies, the deployment of police in schools (safer schools officers[4]), and policies

such as Prevent (Kulz, 2019). These practices illustrate how justice is frequently

conflated with punishment and how safety becomes associated with securitisation.

This is perhaps most clearly theorised through the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP),

which describes how exclusionary and disciplinary policies and procedures increase

the likelihood that certain students will be pushed out of education and into criminal

justice systems (Kim et al. 2010). Race, class, and disability act as markers of

vulnerability within these structures, which monitor, control, and ultimately

marginalise students (Graham, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014). These dynamics are often

compounded by precarious socio-economic conditions and are reflected in the

disproportionate makeup of the prison population (Institute of Race Relations, 2024).

In the United Kingdom, nearly two-thirds of prisoners have experienced a temporary

exclusion from school, and 42% have been permanently excluded (Williams et al.,

2012). Graham (2014) explores the STPP within the British context, concluding that

schools' train' a minority of students, particularly those who are Black or working

class, for later experiences of incarceration. Graham's analysis asserts that

disciplinary power is exercised as a means of social control, perpetuating social

inequality under the guise of educational failure (Graham, 2014). Some scholars

have cautioned against the simplicity of the pipeline metaphor, suggesting it might

distort the complex interplay of factors that mediate the relationship between school

and later imprisonment (McGrew, 2016). This aligns more closely with a conceptual

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[4] Since writing this the Metropolitan Police have announced the withdrawal of safer schools officers from May 2025.

shift toward the school-to-prison nexus (Meiners, 2007). This is an expansive

relational framing accounts for the multiple intersecting systems that structure

carcerality in education and beyond.

UK-based grassroots groups such as No More Exclusions (NME) have linked

abolition and education. Their work confronts carceral logics embedded in education,

policy, and practice while foregrounding community-led visions of safety, belonging

and educational transformation. In publications such as *What About the Other 29?*

(NME, 2022), they challenge the narratives used to justify exclusion.

Within this research, an abolitionist lens is adopted to interrogate the social, cultural,

political, and economic contexts in which school exclusion operates. This forms the

basis for deconstructing school exclusion while simultaneously enabling a

reimagining of educational spaces prioritising inclusion, community well-being, and

justice.

1.6.1 Abolition and Psychology

Literature has drawn parallels between the shared goals of abolition and critical

community psychology (Klukoff et al., 2021; DaViera et al., 2023). Community

psychology recognises that social structures and material conditions shape well-

being and seeks to move beyond the individual to address the societal causes of

distress, grounded in a broader commitment to social justice (Prilleltensky and

Nelson, 2002). A similar link could be made with critical educational psychology,

particularly in calls for the profession to move toward more socially just forms of

practice and research (Corcoran & Vassallo, 2024). These commitments are reflected in efforts to incorporate cultural competence into the Health Care Professionals Standards of Proficiency (HCPC, 2024), which signal the importance of attending to socio-economic factors, cultural contexts, and systemic injustice in practice (Rizvi, 2024).

Abolition could offer EPs a framework to move beyond surface-level reform and to confront the structural and ideological foundations of exclusion. Mngaza (2022) invites EPs to draw on Black feminist epistemology to place knowledge within its historical and political contexts, resisting the abstraction of people from systems of harm. This enables a more politicised psychology oriented toward educational and social justice. An abolitionist stance invites EPs to question binaries of 'good', 'bad', 'deserving' and 'undeserving', and thereby radically reframe how we respond to difference, harm, and human need within education.

Conceptualising School Exclusion

2.1 Legislation

2.1.1 Department for Education (DfE) Guidance

Within legislation, school exclusions are defined as a disciplinary process by which a

pupil is formally removed from education on a school site, either permanently or

temporarily (Hatton, 2013). In England, exclusions are governed by statutory

guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE), which provides

headteachers advice on issuing permanent exclusions and suspensions to create

"*safe, calm and supportive environments*" for staff and pupils (DfE 2024a pg. 11.).

Permanent exclusion removes a child from school indefinitely and should only be

utilised as a last resort for serious or persistent breaches of behaviour policy that

threaten the education or welfare of others. A suspension, limited to a maximum of

45 days per academic year, is a temporary removal with the expectation of return.

While the DfE emphasises that exclusions should be lawful, reasonable, and fair, the

Timpson report (2019) highlights that this standard is not always met.

2.1.1.1 Being Critical of the Policy Definition

The DfE guidance frames school exclusion as a behaviour management tool

intended to establish high standards of behaviour and safety within the school

community (DfE, 2024a). However, the efficacy of exclusion in managing behaviour

has been subject to growing critique (Down et al., 2024; McLean, 2024). These

critiques reflect broader tensions in the literature concerning the limits of traditional

behaviourist approaches rooted in reinforcement and punishment (Armstrong, 2018; Jones et al., 2024). Despite questions about its efficacy, exclusion remains a widely accepted and routinely applied practice in English schools.

The discourses embedded in behaviour legislation, policy, and guidance have been interrogated in the literature, highlighting how they shape and constrain exclusionary practice. In this context, discourse refers not only to language but to the broader systems of meaning that reflect and reproduce social, cultural, and political assumptions (Foucault 1991). Through this lens, policy can be understood not simply as procedural guidance but as a mechanism that shapes constructions of behaviour, discipline, and responsibility (McCluskey et al., 2024). It simultaneously reflects and constructs beliefs about what constitutes an acceptable response to behaviour, who is held responsible and where the focus of the intervention lies.

Studies have challenged these normalising discourses. Tawell and McClusky (2022) argue that current guidance appears more focused on strengthening head teachers' confidence to exclude than acting in the best interests of children and young people. Policy frames behaviour through a binary view of intentionality, positioning the pupil as a site for change and exclusion as a justified consequence of choice. These narratives are proposed to reproduce individualised constructions of behaviour and responsibility, limiting schools' capacity to critically reflect on their role in shaping the conditions that lead to exclusion and restricting the implementation of welfare-based responses (Tawell and McClusky, 2022). Further critique is offered by Mills and Thomson (2022), who highlight how the development of exclusion policy has been shaped by narrow interpretations of evidence, reinforcing the DfE's pre-existing

policy definitions and framing exclusion primarily as a matter of individual failure. This narrow focus neglects broader institutional, social, and structural factors, including the role of identity, inequality, and intersectionality, which shape the ecology of exclusion. In turn, policy responses remain limited in scope, often reinforcing rather than disrupting existing inequalities.

Exclusion policy has been further critiqued because the ambiguity of policy thresholds complicates determining what constitutes a 'serious or persistent breach' of behaviour policy, making it harder to establish if exclusion truly is a last resort (Ferguson, 2021). This obfuscation leads to unclear definitions of illegal exclusion (Timpson, 2019), making it more difficult for parents to know when to challenge or appeal decisions. The subjectivity of policy interpretation and enactment across settings (Tawell, 2023), combined with conflict agendas, such as the tension between 'equity' and 'excellence', creates space for exclusionary decisions to be shaped by institutional pressures related to school league tables and accountability measures (Ainscow et al., 2006).

While the guidance refers to the role of exclusion in ensuring safety, critics argue that policy is fundamentally misaligned with safeguarding responsibilities (Whitehouse, 2022). Children statistically more vulnerable to harm are more likely to be excluded, becoming "*collateral casualties of policy*" (Thompson, Tawell, and Daniels, 2021 pg. 42). Inadequate policy mechanisms mean some children are left without access to suitable education (Whitehouse, 2022), contradicting the Local Authority's (LA) statutory duty to ensure the welfare and safeguarding of children under their jurisdiction (Education Act, 2011). From an intersectional perspective

(Crenshaw, 1991), safeguarding frameworks often overlook children whose experiences of harm are shaped by systemic inequalities. For instance, societal attitudes toward Black boys, shaped by processes such as adultification, contribute to distorted perceptions of vulnerability and diminished legal protections (Davis & Marsh, 2020; Goff et al., 2014).

Others argue that exclusion policy undermines the incorporation of legal frameworks related to human rights, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (Struthers 2021; Tillson and Oxley 2020). In which there is a marked overrepresentation of disabled children in exclusion rates, coupled with a lack of mechanisms within policy to uphold and protect their rights (Porter, 2016).

2.2 Redefining School Exclusion

The policy definition of school exclusion risks obscuring the broader and more complex landscape of exclusion in education. Emerging reconceptualisations understand exclusion as a continuum (Figure 1.), where any decision, action, or process that removes a child from their learning environment or withdraws them from their community is recognised as a form of exclusion (Gill et al., 2024; Hutchinson & Crenna-Jennings, 2019). This spans from officially documented forms of exclusion to practices which are absent from national datasets and formal reporting processes.

Figure 1.

The exclusions continuum

School exclusion

Sanctions

Permanent exclusion

Managed moves

Off-site alternative provision

Suspensions

Internal exclusion

Detention

Stand outside room

Reduce escalation
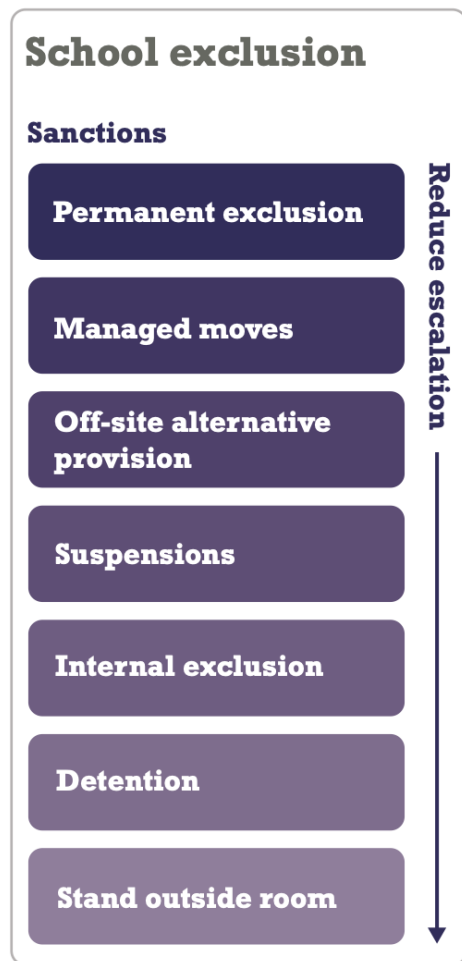
Note. From *Who is losing learning? The case for reducing exclusions across mainstream schools* by Institute for Public Policy Research, 2024.

This position acknowledges that exclusionary practices extend beyond suspensions and permanent exclusion. This means that official exclusion data fails to capture the full extent of the exclusionary landscape and, in turn, the hidden experiences of marginalisation (Power & Taylor, 2020). By naming and including these less visible and undocumented practices, we are better positioned to interrogate how exclusion operates systemically, particularly in ways that are obscured in traditional reporting frameworks. The following section discusses a range of these exclusionary practices to illustrate how exclusion manifests across the continuum.

2.2.1 Illegal, Informal, and Hidden Exclusion

Unlawful and hidden exclusionary practices often operate in ways which evade accountability but carry consequences for children's education and well-being. Off-rolling refers to the removal of a pupil from the school role without using a formal exclusion procedure, often involving decisions made in the interests of the school or practices that coerce parents into withdrawing their child (Ofsted, 2019). In 2017, around 10.1% of children who experienced an 'unexplained exit' during secondary school were children with SEND and were disproportionately represented in these figures (Hutchinson & Crenna-Jennings, 2019). These practices are proposed to reflect the pressures of accountability systems and ideological constructions of 'regular schooling', which justify removing students who do not conform to dominant expectations (Done, Knowler, & Armstrong, 2021).

Informal exclusionary practices also operate within schools to restrict access to education through classroom removal, isolation rooms, and internal exclusions (Power & Taylor, 2020). These practices are proposed to diminish learning time, impact children's mental health and well-being, and erode feelings of belonging (Condliffe, 2023; Trippler, Anderson, & Burn, 2025). Parallels have even been drawn between internal isolation practices and penal institutions, highlighting the carceral logics underpinning their use (Barker et al., 2010).

Although there is less data on patterns of informal or hidden exclusion, Done et al. (2021b) suggest it is likely that the disproportionality mirrors that found in formal exclusions. The Education Policy Institute Report (EPI) (Crenna-Jennings et al., 2024) found that from 2018 to 2019, secondary school students who experienced an

'unexplained exit' or managed move were more likely to have SEMH needs, be persistently absent, be designated as a child in need, or come from a Black ethnic group. This corresponds with associated safeguarding concerns around those who face multiple vulnerabilities and are most likely to be pushed out of mainstream education. Such practices exacerbate existing inequalities and raise questions about the education system's ability to support the most vulnerable learners, potentially contributing to long-term social and educational disparities.

2.2.2 Alternative Provision and Pupil Referral Units

Alternative provision (AP) and Pupil Referral units (PRUs) are often positioned as mid or endpoints along the school exclusion continuum. While not all students in APs or PRUs have been permanently excluded, their placement is frequently associated with a managed move or repeated suspension (Gazelely et al., 2015). Analogous to official figures of school exclusion, PRU populations reflect a disproportionate overrepresentation of working-class, racialised, SEND, and care-experienced children (Malcolm 2018). Educational outcomes for pupils in APs are poor, with only 57% of pupils progressing to education, employment, or training after leaving (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018).

APs and PRUs are highly heterogeneous, operating across both public and private sectors. The literature presents a mixed picture concerning the quality of provision. Some studies highlight benefits such as nurturing relationships, personalised learning, and smaller class sizes (Malcolm, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). These accounts suggest that, in some cases, alternative provisions can create spaces of care and reconnection. However, these are juxtaposed against critical accounts

which raise concerns about staff qualifications (Centre for Social Justice 2020), limited curriculum, and pedagogical approaches shaped by deficit-based assumptions about race and gender (Gillies, 2016; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2015). At its most severe, alternative provision has been implicated in serious safeguarding failures, illustrated by a serious case review into the murder of Child C, which concluded that exclusion and subsequent placement into alternative provision were catalysts for escalating risk (CHSCP, 2020).

While APs and PRUs may offer support and opportunity for some young people, they are situated within a broader continuum of exclusion. Their existence reflects a system which too often removes, rather than adapts for those constructed as challenging, risking the entrenchment of segregation and stigma.

2.3 Defining Exclusion Within this Research

This research rejects the DfE's narrow definition of school exclusion, adopting a broader perspective encompassing covert, informal, and undocumented practices that remove children from learning or restrict full participation in school life. This includes but is not limited to internal exclusion, APs, and off-rolling practices. Expanding the definition allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the ecology of school exclusion and its intersection with gender, socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, and ability (Mills and Thomson, 2022), helping to unveil forms of systemic injustice that are otherwise obscured.

In line with the principles of abolition discussed earlier, this research conceptualises exclusion as part of wider structural processes that marginalise children and sustain

systems of social control, racism, and oppression. It foregrounds the structural

causes of harm and examines how educational and social inequalities are

reproduced and maintained (Daniels & Cole, 2010).

National Context

3.1 Rates of School Exclusion in England

The DfE's latest annual dataset from 2022/23 reports record-breaking levels of suspension and permanent exclusion. Suspensions reached 790,000, marking a 36% increase from the previous year and affecting approximately one in ten pupils. Permanent exclusions rose by 44% to 9,400, surpassing the previous high recorded in 2006/07. Secondary schools exhibited the sharpest rise in suspension rates, accounting for 86% of all permanent exclusions (DfE 2024b). Persistent disruptive behaviour was cited as the primary reason for both suspension and permanent exclusion (DfE, 2024b), a classification criticised for unfairly targeting black and working-class students (Gill et al., 2017). According to the latest Spring term 2023/24 figures, this upward trend shows no sign of slowing (DfE, 2025).

While unofficial exclusion rates are not formally recorded, The IPPR has examined patterns of exclusion across the exclusion continuum. Based on research estimates rather than government datasets, their analysis suggests that during the 18/19 academic year, 30,600 secondary pupils experienced an unexplained, non-family-driven school transfer (Gill et al., 2024). Meanwhile, placements in APs have risen sharply, state-funded placements have increased by 20% and non-state-funded placements by 16% in the 2023/24 academic year (DfE, 2024c). According to the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (2024), approximately 11,600 children are in unregulated AP placements, raising concerns about oversight and safeguarding (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, 2024). While internal isolation and exclusion figures are unknown, existing literature suggests they are frequently used as a

disciplinary measure, excluding students from mainstream classrooms without consistent regulation or scrutiny (Condliffe, 2023; Sealy, Abrams, and Cockburn, 2023).

3.2 Disproportionality

The English education system has long faced disparities in school exclusion rates related to ethnicity, ability, gender, and socioeconomic status- trends which could be seen to represent broader patterns of social inequality. The connection between individual risk factors and susceptibility to school exclusion is well documented (Bacchi, 2000), suggesting unmet needs inside and outside school.

3.2.1 Socioeconomic Disadvantage

In England, 30% of children live in poverty (Henry & Werhnam, 2024), with rising living costs, austerity, and cuts to social support compounding structural disadvantage for families (Centre for Social Justice, 2023). In 2022/23, 59% of pupils permanently excluded were eligible for free school meals (Centre for Social Justice, 2023), but these figures only partially capture the relationship between structural inequality and exclusion. While poverty creates barriers to educational participation (Children's Society, 2018), recent research emphasises that students with 'high needs' living in deprived areas face the most significant risk of formal and hidden exclusion (Hulme, Adamson, Griffiths, 2024). This trend is exacerbated by England's quasi-market education system, where league tables, high-stakes accountability, and academisation place disproportionate pressure on schools serving high-needs

populations. In this context, practices of between-school segregation can emerge (Hulme, Adamson, & Griffiths, 2024).

3.2.2 Race and Ethnicity

In 2022-2023, pupils from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller[5] (GRT) backgrounds faced the highest exclusion rates (DfE, 2024). Students of Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage also remained disproportionately represented (DfE, 2024b), replicating a continued pattern of heightened risk to exclusion (Graham et al., 2019). Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean students are 1.5 times more likely than the national average to undergo a managed move (Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2024). While all groups are overrepresented in APs, Gypsy and Roma children are 4 times more likely to be placed there (DfE, 2024c).

Although these groups experience distinct histories and forms of marginalisation, both are significantly overrepresented in exclusion figures. For Black pupils, racial disparities have been indicated to persist even after controlling for other variables (Gaffney et al., 2021), suggesting the operation of structural racism within exclusionary processes. While disproportionality affecting GRT pupils has been similarly persistent, research is more limited and tends to focus on the experiences of ethnic discrimination, social exclusion, and inadequate institutional support (James, 2022). These patterns also extend across welfare and justice systems. Black and GRT families are disproportionately involved with social services (DfE,

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[5] The term Gypsy, Roma, Traveller is an umbrella term often used by policy makers to describe a range of ethnic groups with nomadic ways of life. It is acknowledged that this does not capture the distinct histories, cultures, and experiences of groups who fall under this umbrella.

2023), with Roma and Traveller children three times more likely to be taken into care (European Roma Rights Centre, 2018).

Racial and ethnic disproportionality in exclusion has persisted for decades (Stewart-Hall, Langham, & Miller, 2023), suggesting systemic discrimination rather than isolated incidents. Research highlights the multiple drivers of inequity for Black children, including lowered teacher expectations, funding cuts, racist stereotyping, and institutional bias (Demie, 2021). Reports from GRT advocacy groups similarly describe experiences of being pushed out of education through institutionally coerced exclusion, influenced by racism, discriminatory policies, and inadequate support (The Traveller Movement, 2024).

3.2.3 Special Educational Needs and Disability

Although pupils with SEND make up just 18% of the student population (DfE, 2024d), they account for approximately half of all exclusions (DfE, 2024b). This disproportionate representation is evident across all measures of exclusion (Gill et al., 2024), alongside facing a higher likelihood of placement in AP (Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

Exclusion rates vary depending on the level of SEND support. Children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are nearly three times more likely to be excluded than their non-SEND peers, while children receiving SEN Support are over five times more likely (DfE, 2024b). While EHCPs may offer some protection against exclusion (Thomson, 2023), reliance on formal identification as the gateway to support has been critiqued for narrowing how children's needs are understood.

Policy and accountability pressures have encouraged increasingly medicalised framings of vulnerability, emphasising clinical diagnosis over relational, ecological, or systemic understandings (Porter & Tawell, 2024). This risks leaving pupils without a formal diagnosis unsupported, increasing the likelihood that unmet needs escalate and culminate in exclusion.

Systemic challenges further compound these patterns. The education system is described as struggling to meet rising levels of need (DfE SEND Review, 2022), leaving many pupils without timely or appropriate support. The lack of early intervention, cuts to local authority services (Larkham & Ren, 2025), and financial pressures on schools (Pinball Kids, 2020) exacerbate these difficulties and increase the likelihood of exclusion.

Among SEND pupils, those with social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH) are the most frequently suspended (Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2024) and are significantly over-represented in AP at 17 times the rate of the general population. The escalating prevalence and complexity of children's mental health needs nationally (NHS England, 2023) places additional strain on schools' capacity for inclusion. Difficulties accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), combined with restrictive referral thresholds (Centre for Social Justice, 2024), have left many children without support. These pressures amplify the risk of exclusion and suggest the need for more integrated and holistic approaches to supporting children's psychological, social, and educational needs.

3.3 Lasting Impact of School Exclusion

School exclusion is associated with later adverse outcomes across education, employment, health, and well-being. The extent to which exclusion can be understood as directly causal remains complex, given that many excluded children already face significant structural disadvantages (Obsuth et al., 2024). Some argue that exclusion should not be seen simply as a trigger for poor outcomes but as part of wider systemic mechanisms which isolate, marginalise and compound pre-existing inequality (Deuchar & Bhopal, 2020).

Research utilising causal inference methodologies strengthens claims of exclusions' direct impact on worsening outcomes. A longitudinal study found that permanent exclusion was associated with poorer health and well-being outcomes in early adulthood, including elevated psychological distress and longstanding illness (Obsuth et al., 2024). These findings suggest that exclusion reflects a marker of vulnerability and acts as a mechanism that exacerbates disadvantage over time.

Data also reveals that excluded students experience poorer educational attainment (McGovnern et al., 2019; Gill et al., 2017), with effects that likely ripple into reduced access to further education, diminished employment prospects, and broader economic insecurity (Gill et al., 2017, Joseph & Crenna-Jennings, 2024). Exclusion could be understood as a rung in the process of deep exclusion (Levitas et al., 2017), which refers to a multidimensional form of marginalisation in which disadvantage across domains such as education, employment, housing, health, and social participation becomes mutually reinforcing. Excluded pupils are more likely to experience poverty, interact with social services, and have mental health needs (Gill

et al., 2017). They also face heightened risks of homelessness (Spinelli et al., 2017), substance misuse (McCrystal et al., 2007), and long-term psychological distress (McGue & Iacono, 2005; Obsuth et al., 2024). Within this framing, exclusion operates as a catalyst that amplifies cumulative disadvantage, perpetuating a cycle of social exclusion that extends far beyond the initial school exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2019).

3.4 Chapter Summary

The data across all aspects of the school exclusion continuum suggests a system in crisis that surveils, abandons and punishes rather than cares for and includes. Exclusion rates continue to rise, disproportionately impacting children already marginalised by class, race, and disability. This persistent overrepresentation points to a system entangled with classism, racism and ableism, challenging narratives which frame exclusion as necessary or neutral. Instead, it paints a picture of a system that penalises children for structural conditions they face while failing to address the inequalities that amplify their vulnerability. The patterns outlined in this chapter position exclusion as an issue of social justice, demanding attention to the processes that produce and sustain educational inequality. The following chapter builds on this foundation and explores the processes of school exclusion through a systemic and socially just lens.

Narrative Literature Review

The literature review examines how school exclusion is understood as an issue of social justice. It moves beyond identifying patterns of disproportionality and inequality, seeking instead to critically explore the processes that underpin these disparities. Focus is placed on theorising school exclusion in relation to broader structures of systemic inequality and injustice while considering implications for practice. The review also aims to situate the research within the current landscape of knowledge and theory (Braun & Clark, 2021), assessing prevailing conceptualisations of exclusion and building a rationale for examining it through an abolitionist lens.

Rather than presenting an exhaustive or objective account of exclusion, this review embraces its complex and multifaceted nature (Hallett & Hallett, 2021). A narrative approach allows for synthesising diverse literature and theoretical perspectives, offering flexibility in answering broader questions (Baumeister, 1997). This approach supports a critical interpretation of the literature, which challenges dominant narratives and disrupts disciplinary silos.

Consistent with a critical paradigm, the review recognises that school exclusion cannot be fully understood through a single disciplinary frame. It, therefore, draws on a range of academic fields to develop a more integrated understanding of the factors that influence, sustain, and perpetuate exclusionary practices. As Foucault (1982) observed, external systems of meaning both shape and constrain subjects. Correspondingly, this review explores theoretical and conceptual interactions across social, cultural, and political analyses to deepen the understanding of the processes at work.

Although this is not a systematic review, a search strategy has been employed for transparency, this is detailed in Appendix A. A total of 31 papers were selected for review, a table of these papers is located in Appendix B.

The following question guides the review:

- How does the literature theorise the processes and dynamics of school exclusion as related to wider systemic factors and issues of social justice?

4.1 Constructions of Social Justice

The concept of social justice is not fixed but varies and evolves across disciplines and contexts. Broadly, it is concerned with addressing inequalities and promoting fairness across economic, political, and social domains (Reisch, 2014). Some accounts emphasise the distributive aspects of justice, focusing on the equitable allocation of resources and opportunities (Bell, 1997; Bhugra, 2016), while others highlight its political dimension, positioning the alleviation of inequality and oppression as a matter of justice rather than charity (Jackson, 2005). Others foreground the relational and human aspects of social justice, centring a duty of care and solidarity with marginalised communities (Robinson, 2010). Rather than representing a single vision, social justice encompasses a spectrum of approaches toward its achievement, from reforms that suggest incremental change within existing structures to transformative approaches that pursue systemic overhaul.

Fraser (2009) proposes a tridimensional model of social justice (Figure 2), which offers a useful organising framework for this review. Social justice is conceptualised

as requiring three interrelated dimensions: the fair distribution of economic resources, the cultural recognition of marginalised identities, and the political representation of excluded groups. These elements facilitate what Fraser calls participatory parity (Fraser, 2003), the ability to participate fully within social life. This model provides a structure to interrogate how economic inequality, cultural misrecognition, and political marginalisation interact to shape the processes and consequences of school exclusion. Although not all papers included in this review explicitly frame themselves in terms of social justice, each engages with issues of economic inequality, cultural misrecognition, or political marginalisation. Together, they add to a broader understanding of how systems and structures sustain and contribute to educational exclusion.

Figure 2

Visual representation of Fraser's three justice dimensions
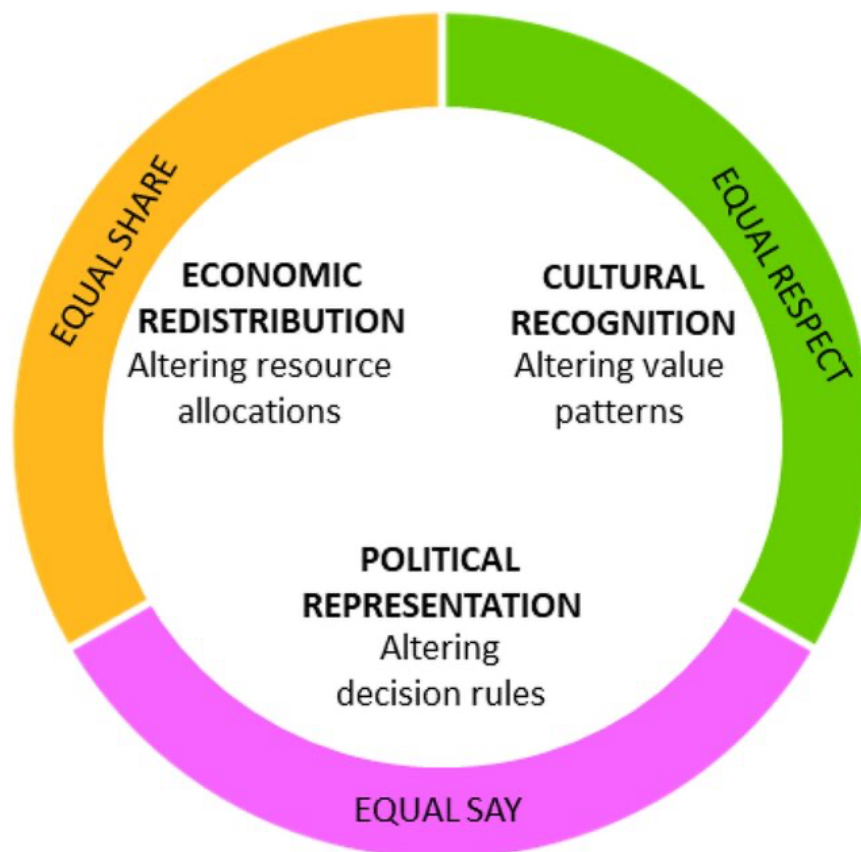
4.2 Structural Disadvantage

Structural disadvantage refers to a type of inequality produced by the social, economic, and political systems that govern society. Influenced by laws, policies, the distribution of resources, and dominant societal norms, these systems create barriers which limit opportunities and impact outcomes for marginalised groups. Structural disadvantage reflects how power and privilege are distributed and maintained across society (Yates, 2010), exemplified by persistent disparities in exclusion among different groups.

The literature broadly points toward the impact of policies (Power and Taylor, 2021; McCluskey et al., 2024), cultural norms and practices (Caslin, 2019; Done, Knowler & Armstrong, 2021; Rizvi, 2024; Thomas, 2025), and political economies (Cole et al., 2019; Daniels & Thompson, 2024; McCluskey et al., 2019) as drivers of structural disadvantage in relation to exclusion. These drivers disproportionately impact groups defined by race, class, and disability while also intersecting with culture-related adversities such as those faced by asylum-seeking families (Kulz, 2019). Drawing on the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the literature emphasises how overlapping systems of oppression compound disadvantage and deepen inequalities in exclusion (Bei and Knowler, 2022; Burnett and Wood-Downie, 2024).

4.2.1 Contextual Approaches

Arnez and Condry (2021) draw on criminological theories to explore the relationship between school exclusion and youth offending, critiquing binary and linear models of causality. The paper emphasises the importance of holistically recognising children's

lived and educational experiences to understand the processes that lead to exclusion. The concept of interconnected conditions (Beckett et al., 2017), a social theory of harm, is drawn upon to capture how overlapping systems and factors contribute to individual outcomes. This perspective challenges decontextualised views of school exclusion, emphasising how cumulative systemic disadvantages coalesce to create patterns of exclusion. It rejects decontextualised and individualistic explanations, proposing they pathologise children while ignoring broader structural influences.

The cumulative disadvantage framework (Sampson & Laub, 1997) is applied by Arnes and Condry to illuminate further how these interconnected conditions interact to compound marginalisation. This lens proposes that exclusion is not a discrete event but a dynamic process accumulating with greater frequency and magnitude among disadvantaged groups. Pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as disrupted school attendance, housing instability, food insecurity, and community violence, are proposed to exacerbate exclusionary risk while eroding protective factors and blocking access to supportive resources (Arnez and Condry, 2021).

Murphy (2022) expands the analysis by exploring the symbolic and material dimensions of disadvantage, asserting that hierarchies of disadvantage are shaped by racism, ableism, and classism, which heighten disciplinary scrutiny and measures. Bei and Knowler (2022) provide additional nuance in which their composite accounts of exclusion focus on the experiences of racialised children. Factors such as parental unemployment, housing instability, and systemic discrimination were proposed to intersect with exclusionary school practices and disproportionately target racialised students. Notably, in Murphy's (2022) study,

young people often lacked insight into how structural problems feed into their behaviour, theorising that the effects of social disadvantage are often obscured from children's immediate awareness due to the covert mechanisms of power and influence that shape their educational experiences.

Murphy (2022) and Bei and Knowler (2022) situate individual behaviour within a broader matrix of interconnected conditions, challenging deficit-focused models that frame exclusion as an individual failing. Instead, they argue for an ecological perspective that acknowledges how overlapping systems perpetuate the cycles of disadvantage. Notably, the studies bridge the gap between statistics, which indicate a link between exclusion and social disadvantage and attempts to understand how these socio-political influences operate and manifest in practice. Murphy (2022) employs Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner,1979) to frame the analysis, proposing a multi-layered approach to intervention which considers the wider societal structures that shape local contexts and individual experiences.

Gazeley et al. (2015) highlight the absence of a contextualised understanding of exclusion in English education policy, critiquing the superficial use of disproportionality data, which fails to inform effective responses to systemic inequities. They propose a whole-system approach that integrates institutional, local, and policy-level responses to disproportionality in exclusionary outcomes. This is affirmed in Porter and Tawell's (2024) analysis of conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability, noting that the shift in national policy towards a more diagnosis-driven understanding of vulnerability influences who is viewed as 'at risk' or 'a risk'. Those who don't fit the policy definitions of vulnerability or do not respond to individualised

intervention were described to tip from 'at risk' to 'a risk', a marker which drives

exclusionary practice. They advocate for a social-relational understanding of risk in

relation to exclusion, which emphasises the role of relational interactions in shaping

how student behaviours are interpreted and responded to.

While Arnez and Condry (2021) support a contextual approach, critical questions

remain concerning the conceptualisations of justice embedded within criminological

frameworks, particularly regarding how dominant measures of success, such as the

reduction of exclusion, can obscure the more radical question of what an inclusive

and just system might look like. Porter and Tawell's proposal of a social-relational

approach offers a complementary response, suggesting an alternative framework

which neither marginalises nor pathologises when engaging with notions of risk and

vulnerability.

4.2.2 Disability and Society

The literature emphasises how exclusionary practices reflect and perpetuate existing

societal inequalities related to disability. Disability studies perspectives in the

literature critically examine how disabilities are socially, culturally, and politically

constructed, particularly in relation to students categorised under the label of social,

emotional, and mental health (SEMH) (Caslin, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021).

Drawing on Parsons and Howlett's (1996) work, Caslin (2021) argues that

exclusionary practices continue to represent a societal failure to adequately support

these students in mainstream educational contexts. Murphy (2022) frames schools

as microcosms of broader systemic biases, which intertwine with neoliberal

educational frameworks that prioritise academic performance, compliance, and

efficiency over equity and inclusion (Done et al., 2021). Such frameworks undermine

inclusive principles and are proposed to contribute to a process of 'disabling' through the ways young people are responded to within exclusionary systems (Caslin, 2021).

Disability studies advocate for a fundamental shift away from the individual toward institutional and structural change, which allows for full participation in society. This encompasses a fundamental reimagining of systems as guided by a prioritisation of inclusion to offset exclusionary pressures. This reimagining would require addressing the structural barriers within schools and the broader societal norms that inform and sustain these inequities.

4.2.2.1 Labels and Stigma

According to the literature, labels and stigma play a role in perpetuating the exclusion of disabled students. Caslin (2021) employed creative methodologies, such as graffiti walls, storytelling, and educational life grids, to gather the views of excluded pupils. Utilising a disability studies lens, it emphasised the importance of addressing power dynamics when collecting and interpreting young people's perspectives. In centring children's voices in both analysis and interpretation, the research suggested that participants were constructed as problems to be managed rather than as individuals navigating systemic barriers to inclusion. These labels were described to shape teacher perceptions of students and legitimise punitive and exclusionary practices. Through exploring children's meaning-making of exclusionary processes, Murphy (2022) highlighted how the stigma attached to labels of disability affected participants' self-concept and peer relations. Students with learning disabilities internalised negative narratives about themselves, impacting how readily they might accept support or intervention. For some, concerns over peer judgement overshadowed the direct experience of or concerns about exclusion. This casts a

question as to whether the identification and labelling of needs are always experienced as helpful by children in the current educational context.

Thompson et al. (2021) critique the Timpson Report's (2019) suggestion that better identification and diagnosis of needs could reduce exclusion rates for pupils with SEMH needs. While acknowledging that accurate identification can be beneficial, an overemphasis on diagnosis alone risks reinforcing deficit-based frameworks. Their analysis suggests that children with SEMH needs often become the collateral casualties of broader policy conflicts and resource constraints rather than victims of inadequate identification. Both Caslin (2021) and Thompson et al. (2021) critique the overemphasis on diagnostic identification, arguing that such a narrow focus reinforces deficit-based, medicalised frameworks which further marginalise children. Both call for shifting attention from improving identification alone to addressing deeper systemic inequalities embedded in policy and practice.

4.2.2.2 Barriers to Inclusion

The literature explores how barriers to inclusion hinder equitable access and support for students who experience multiple disadvantages; in some cases, these barriers are proposed to act as exclusionary mechanisms in themselves. Interconnected factors such as the fragmentation of the education system and conflicts in professional priorities have been implicated as significant obstacles to inclusion (Thompson et al., 2021).

The growing demand for SEND support coupled with a backdrop of austerity has affected the capacity of schools and local authorities to provide adequate services

for children with high-level needs (Thompson et al., 2021). These systemic

pressures not only limit the effectiveness of inclusion policies but also exacerbate the

marginalisation and exclusion of vulnerable students, particularly those with SEMH

needs. Thompson et al. (2021) illustrate how underfunded systems have led some

schools to resort to permanent exclusion to ensure children receive assessment and

"appropriate" intervention via alternative provision. Some headteachers shared that

excluding students shifted financial responsibility back to local authorities, making

exclusion a cost-saving strategy.

The literature critiques how neoliberal accountability systems and performance-

driven metrics further reinforce exclusionary practices. Schools are incentivised to

prioritise students who enhance performance metrics, often at the expense of those

who require additional support. This has driven off-rolling practices, where students

with SEMH needs are excluded informally to preserve institutional reputations

(Thompson et al., 2021). These competitive pressures exemplify broader critiques of

neoliberal education policies that prioritise efficiency and institutional performance

over equity and inclusion. The emphasis on outcomes over holistic support

undermines efforts to address the systemic marginalisation of vulnerable students.

The decentralisation of the education system has been critiqued on the basis that

academisation has eroded patterns of communication and collaboration between

schools and local authorities (Thompson et al., 2021; Power & Taylor, 2021).

Academies' ability to opt out of support systems for vulnerable students has further

fragmented the educational landscape (Thompson et al., 2021). This fragmentation

is also linked to challenges in interprofessional working, whereby effective inclusion

requires cohesive effort among educators, social workers, and health practitioners.

Thompson et al. (2021) introduce the concept of "conflicts in professional concern," where different actors (e.g., schools, local authorities, and health services) have competing priorities which undermine collaborative efforts to support students with SEMH needs. For example, local authorities may focus on resource allocation, while schools may prioritise immediate academic performance, creating tension in delivering consistent and effective support. The accounts of English local authority education officers highlight the need for a unified framework that fosters collaboration across institutional boundaries. Such a framework could address systemic fragmentation by promoting shared priorities and coordinated efforts of support.

4.3 Racial Injustice

Longstanding disproportionality related to race has been discussed within the literature. Various frameworks and lenses have been applied to theorise racialised patterns of exclusion in Britain and England, ranging from analyses of racial governance (Kulz, 2019; Rizvi, 2024**)** to constructions of normative whiteness (Wright, 2010).

4.3.1 Structural and Institutional Racism.

Institutional and structural racism refers to understandings of racism which extend beyond individual prejudice. Structural racism describes how interconnected societal systems operate to produce and sustain inequalities for racialised groups (Braveman et al., 2022). Whereas institutional racism refers more specifically to how policies

and practices operate within and between institutions (such as schools), disadvantaging certain racial groups (Williams, 1985).

Parsons (2009) critiques how passive forms of racism are embedded within school exclusion processes, sustained through institutional inaction masked by claims of neutrality. Following the Macpherson report, the now defunct Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) introduced a legal duty to address institutional racism. Still, Parsons argued that it failed to produce meaningful systems of accountability concerning disproportional exclusion rates according to race and ethnicity. In practice, schools collect ethnicity data but may fail to take action to address disparities, which normalises and paints them as inevitable (Parsons, 2009). Similar critiques have been made of Its successor the Equality Act (2010), considered by some as ineffective in tackling institutional racism (The Alliance for Racial Justice, 2024), although its direct implications for school exclusion remain underexplored. However, this critique aligns with other proposals within the literature that suggest data on disproportionality often fails to provoke an effective systemic response (Gazeley, 2015).

Carlile (2012) provides further insight into how institutional racism materialises locally. Using an ethnographic research design within an LA Children's Services Department, the paper captures how exclusion processes were shaped by implicit racial bias embedded in professional discourse, policy implementation, and bureaucratic processes. Rather than operating distinctively, interpersonal and institutional racism was found to blur together in everyday decision-making. The participant-observer approach offered a window into the internal operations of

exclusion processes from within local government. Unlike more distanced policy analyses, it illuminated how racial injustice becomes embedded through professional norms, which go unchallenged.

Racial disproportionality in exclusion is also proposed to be situated within broader historical and socio-political contexts of racialised and classed marginalisation (Thomas, 2025). Drawing on frameworks of intersectionality and post-structuralism, Thomas argues that exclusion is socially constructed through discourses that position certain children as 'bad' subjects (Gillies, 2016), noting that race and class are central to these constructions. This divide between good and bad is also proposed to manifest between PRUs and mainstream schools, whereby PRUs become divided spaces where racialised working-class boys are overrepresented and stigmatised. Thomas critiques the tendency of policy discourse to flatten lived experiences into abstract categories, instead calling attention to the material realities and emotional impacts of exclusion. The study explains how exclusion is felt and enacted in everyday educational spaces and foregrounds how exclusion processes reflect historical continuities of racial segregation. PRUs were compared with the racist labelling of West Indian children as educationally subnormal (Coard, 1971), and their placement in specialist schools (Thomas, 2025).

These studies collectively argue that recognising institutional racism is insufficient without accountability measures and structural reform. This resonates with McCluskey's (2016) application of Fraser's (2008) theory of social justice, which problematises focusing on recognition alone within addressing issues of disproportionality. While Parsons and Carlile highlight failures in accountability,

Thomas makes visible how these dimensions of inequality are lived and experienced within education settings. Without addressing these material conditions and institutional logics, efforts toward racial justice could be seen to remain superficial. These studies argue for a shift from rhetorical commitments to racial equity and instead toward implementing tangible accountability frameworks.

4.3.2 Critical Race Theory and Normative Whiteness

Critical Race Theory (CRT) centres race in its analysis, highlighting how racism is sustained through institutional structures, cultural norms, and professional practices (Joseph, 2020; Bei & Knowler, 2022). CRT challenges liberal claims to neutrality and foregrounds the role of intersectional marginalisation in shaping unequal outcomes.

A key methodology of CRT is counter-storytelling, which legitimises the experiential knowledge of racially minoritised communities to disrupt dominant narratives that obscure structural inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Joseph (2020) and Bei & Knowler (2022) employ counter-stories to centre the voices of those often erased by policy and popular discourse. Bei and Knowler (2022) use composite narratives to highlight the experiences of off-rolling for pupils racialised as Black, proposing that hidden processes of exclusion place these learners "*in a space located beyond care and inclusion*" (Pg. 1). Joseph (2020) examines how neoliberal schooling environments exacerbate racial disparities. The paper proposes that educators, operating under performance measures, position Black students as liabilities. Here, meritocratic ideals appear race-neutral but sustain racialised inequality, illustrating how CRT can expose the racialised dimensions of exclusionary practices, making

visible what is often obscured by colour-blind policy framings as highlighted by Parson's (2009).

CRT is a theoretical frame and a methodology of resistance and transformation (Lawrence, 2022), which connects personal experience with structural racism. Bei and Knowler (2022) highlight how counter-stories can sit uncomfortably within positivist traditions and what constitutes evidence within research on school exclusion. A critique which reflects the very epistemic injustice CRT seeks to address, whereby dominant knowledge systems dismiss the truths of those they marginalise.

The concept of normative Whiteness is discussed in the literature. It refers to a cultural structure in which whiteness is naturalised as the unmarked norm, against which all other identities are positioned as 'other' (Leonardo, 2004; Wright, 2010). In educational contexts, normative Whiteness is proposed to shape ideas of the 'ideal pupil', constructed as white, middle-class, and compliant. In contrast, non-white pupils are othered through processes of racialisation (Wright, 2010). Wright's (2010) ethnographic study proposes that normative whiteness operates within classroom interactions and shapes how pupils are assessed, disciplined, and positioned within school hierarchies. Teachers were proposed to interpret Black children's behaviour through racialised lenses, perceiving assertiveness as aggression and sociability as disruption. These perceptions were proposed to be embedded within a broader structure of Whiteness that framed Black children's cultural expressions as disruptive to the normative expectations of the school. Joseph (2020) similarly highlighted that Whiteness also governed whose advocacy is legitimised, with Black parents' concerns more likely to be dismissed. In processes of exclusion, normative

Whiteness shapes interpretation and punishment, embedding racial bias into disciplinary systems.

Literature which takes up a CRT lens gestures toward transformative approaches to tackle school exclusion. Bei and Knowler (2022) advocate for educators to develop their racial literacy not merely as awareness but as the ability to critically interrogate Whiteness and challenge institutional cultures that reward complicity. Wright (2010) similarly insists that change must occur within schools themselves, calling for a fundamental reconfiguration of how difference is perceived, engaged with, and structurally addressed.

The application of CRT within the literature often focuses primarily on the experiences of students racialised as Black. A gap remains to explore the experiences of other minoritised groups constructed as 'other' within frames of normative Whiteness. There is an absence of literature which examines the processes of exclusion for GRT families who face the highest exclusion rates nationally (DfE, 2024b). Critical scholars argue that there is a role for CRT in exposing and addressing the impact of anti-Gypsy and anti-Roma racism and discrimination in education (Marsh & Morgan, 2025).

4.3.3 Representations of Racialised Students

The literature also examines the psychological and social processes of racial discrimination within exclusionary practices. Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1998) is employed by Howarth (2004) to examine how racialised representations of Black British children shape exclusionary practice and children's

lived experiences. Social representations refer to the shared systems of meaning through which groups make sense of the social world, reinforcing collective understandings and social bonds (Hoijer, 2011). Howarth reworks the theory through a critical lens, arguing that deficit representations of Black British boys, circulated through media, policy, and everyday discourse, are not only embedded in institutional practices but may become internalised by children themselves. This internalisation can lead to 'acted identities' where students come to embody the roles assigned to them. Howarth emphasises the potential to resist these constructions through reframing and community dialogue. Situating this interpretation alongside Wright's (2010) in the prior section, a more structural reading emerges, deficit narratives are not just socially shared but are proposed to be influenced by hegemonic whiteness. Where Howarth interprets some pupil behaviours as internalisations of stigma, Wright reframes them as acts of resistance to negotiate their marginalised positions but highlights that these strategies of resistance (such as disengagement or non-compliance) come at a cost and can lead to exacerbated processes of exclusion. Belonging becomes constrained by the norms that define who can be seen as a legitimate member of the school community.

The relationship between racialised labelling and belonging is sharpened by Burnett & Wood-Downie (2024), who explore how the intersecting identities of Black Caribbean boys can undermine their sense of belonging in schools. Their analysis suggests that exclusion is a culmination of how children are constructed as other through aspects of racialised hypervisibility, socio-economic disadvantage, and gendered expectations. There is a particular focus on teacher-student relationships in which differential treatment, low academic expectations, and racialised

perceptions of behaviour act as cumulative threats to belonging. Drawing on belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), they hypothesise that perceived exclusion triggers emotional and behavioural responses, which are read through lenses of deficit and reinforcing cycles of exclusion.

The literature suggests that racialised representations are socially and institutionally produced. Howarth (2004) offers the possibility of collective resistance through community dialogue and reframing of identity, suggesting that such processes can interrupt the dominant 'truths' imposed by schools. Wright (2010) offers a more cautious reading of resistance, raising critical questions about the cost of resistance for students navigating systems that are structurally unresponsive to their realities. While Howarth sees the potential of participation in reshaping social meaning, Wright foregrounds the limitations of such agency when structural conditions remain unchanged.

4.4 Socio-political and Economic Influences

The literature examines the political economies of school exclusion across Britain. This refers to how social practices, including exclusion, are shaped by the interaction of political ideologies, economic structures, and power relations. A growing body of research, much of it emerging from the Excluded Lives Project[6], examines how political economies influence decision-making, resource allocation, and institutional priorities in relation to school exclusion.

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[6] Excluded Lives is a large-scale multidisciplinary research project which featured a series of studies exploring school exclusion across the UK, completed by the Department of Education at the University of Oxford.

4.4.1 Political Economies of School Exclusion

Within the English context, the literature broadly concurs that neoliberalism and marketisation have restructured education systems by embedding competition and accountability into its core (Done & Knowler, 2022; Thompson et al., 2021; Done & Knowler, 2020). Neoliberalism refers to the socio-economic and political ideology that advocates for market-based principles across public services, including education (Wilson, 2017). This shift is proposed to have transformed schools into quasi-businesses which prioritise metrics such as academic results and league table rankings over holistic student outcomes (Daniels and Thompson, 2024).

Daniels and Thompson (2024) present findings from a large-scale Economic and Social Research Council project that used Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to explore the systemic contradictions driving differential exclusion rates across the UK. This multidisciplinary approach, involving educators, students, and policymakers, illuminates the interplay among policy, institutional practice, and individual experience. CHAT recognises exclusion as a complex and layered problem and focuses on the influence of historical, cultural, and institutional factors to avoid creating a partial or decontextualised understanding of exclusion. Daniels and Thompson (2024) identified systemic contradictions between inclusive policy rhetoric and the operational pressures of marketisation, arguing that funding formulas and accountability measures create pressured environments which exacerbate exclusionary practices. Something which is reflected in Cole et al.'s (2019) analysis of the English context, which mapped factors associated with high levels of school exclusion. The study spotlighted the impact of high-stakes

accountability measures as intensifying curriculum demands, alongside the shifting of power and resources through academisation. They highlighted how acute financial pressures and a landscape of broader social inequalities, meant schools were not able to keep up with the demands for support. Together, they proposed that these factors eroded school's capacity for inclusive practice, particularly in under-resourced schools which face intense performance scrutiny.

Neoliberal discourses are also proposed to promote individualised narratives, framing exclusion as a personal failure rather than a failure of the system (Done & Knowler, 2022; Daniels & Thompson, 2024). Done et al. (2021b) and Daniels and Thompson (2024) critique this individualisation, highlighting how it obscures broader systemic forces. Meanwhile, in the Welsh and Scottish contexts, there appears to be an emphasis on policy frameworks that propose exclusion as a collective failure, placing the responsibility on schools to prevent exclusionary practices (McCluksey, 2019).

Comparative studies reveal differences across UK jurisdictions. McCluskey et al. (2019) and McCluskey et al. (2024) note that while exclusion figures have risen substantially in England, they have declined in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. McCluskey et al. (2024) attribute this to divergences in policy frameworks. While all four countries show a commitment to inclusion rhetorically, England's policy context emphasises the ethic of competition and institutional control, which grants headteachers more autonomy to exclude students. In contrast, Wales and Scotland are proposed to emphasise the ethics of cooperation, universality, and equality of outcomes. This divergence is proposed to reflect broader cultural differences, whereby, in England, exclusion is framed as a rational, market-driven response to

accountability pressures (Done and Knowler, 2022).

While the literature which aligns itself with social justice critiques the impact of neoliberalism on education, there is an acknowledgement that some might argue that neoliberal reforms have increased efficiency, improved standards, and strengthened accountability (Klees, 2008). Still, critical writings consistently challenge these claims, highlighting how market logic obscures the reproduction of inequality and reinforces exclusionary practices. Within this framework, exclusion could be seen as a structural feature of a system driven by competition and institutional self-interest.

4.4.1.1 The Interaction Between Racism and Neoliberalism

Three studies explore how racism and neoliberalism interact to shape patterns of school exclusion. Parsons (2009) proposes that racial disproportionality in exclusion is veiled within neoliberal policy environments. Suggesting that race equality initiatives, whilst rhetorically committed to addressing institutional racism, have been undermined by individualised framings and market-driven priorities which allow structural inequalities to persist. The literature builds on this idea and proposes that neoliberalism doesn't just ignore racism but actively reshapes it (Joseph, 2020; Kulz, 2019). Drawing on Goldberg's (2008) concept of racial neoliberalism, Kulz (2019) identifies how the demands of accountability and performance lead schools to treat some students as expendable. Within a neoliberal climate, children's worth becomes tethered to measurable outputs and narrows who is considered a 'normal' pupil, which makes it harder to identify or challenge racial injustice.

Joseph (2020) similarly argues that neoliberal meritocracy masks racial bias by framing success as an individual achievement and failure as a personal fault. It is suggested that this logic disproportionately penalises racially minoritised students, especially within pressurised school environments (Joseph, 2020). This process of exclusion as self-preservation ultimately includes the racialised expendability of certain groups. Across these studies, there is agreement that neoliberalism and racism are mutually reinforcing systems that sustain inequality and exclusion.

4.4.1.2 Perverse Incentives

The English political economy creates contradictory policy discourses which task schools with maximising academic performance whilst fostering inclusivity. Several papers note how this pressure drives hidden exclusion, in which academic performance and institutional rankings precede student inclusion (Daniels, Thompson, & Tawell, 2019; Thompson et al., 2021; Done & Knowler, 2022). Using Ball's (2003) concept of performativity, Done and Knowler (2022) critique how conflicting accountability frameworks, such as those enforced by Ofsted, incentivise practices like off-rolling to maintain favourable institutional outcomes. They identify a conflict between the economic rationality of market-driven school improvement and the political rationality of inclusive education. While off-rolling can safeguard a school's league table standing, it simultaneously undermines access to education for children. These practices are proposed to disproportionately impact students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds or those with SEND/SEMH needs (Power and Taylor, 2021).

While off-rolling is proposed to reflect a disregard for the rights of the child, Done and Knowler (2020) offer a nuanced account of how this practice might emerge. Noting while it does not preclude agency, off-rolling is reflective of headteacher's making pragmatic decisions in response to external pressures. Noting that the sole blame of headteachers from bodies like Ofsted serves to deflect the scrutiny away from the conditions that incentivise exclusion in the first place. However, Power and Taylor (2021) offer a more critical stance, implicating headteachers as complicit in exclusionary practices. They argue that headteachers sometimes knowingly reproduce inequality in the name of organisational survival, raising questions about professional responsibility and moral agency.

The way these competing pressures are rationalised may also be triangulated with the prevalence of utilitarian decision-making logic, where the needs of the "many" are prioritised over the "few" (Gillett-Swan & Lundy, 2022). When faced with performativity demands, schools may justify exclusionary actions as necessary to preserve the learning environment for the majority, reflecting a structure that redefines exclusion through the lens of pragmatism.

4.4.2 Power and Governance

A series of studies utilise poststructuralist and Foucauldian frameworks to explore how exclusion is governed. These frameworks propose that exclusion is shaped by a complex network of discursive forces that construct what is considered 'normal' within schooling. Done and Knowler (2020; 2022) use the concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991) to trace how schools internalise the rationalities of performance management and accountability. Governmentality refers to the ways in which states

exert control over populations through subtle forms of governance via social and cultural mechanisms and institutions (Li, 2007). Governance is not just top-down but dispersed through professional norms, performative demands, and risk-aversion strategies that coerce school leaders into aligning with market logic.

Potter, Done, and Knowler's (2022) analysis of school leaders' tweets illustrates how off-rolling is downplayed or denied in public discourse despite its apparent normalisation in practice. This reflects a broader culture of performative image management, where exclusionary practices are obscured through professional rhetoric and institutional silence. In a related study, Done and Knowler (2020) propose that headteachers are caught between conflicting imperatives of inclusion as policy rhetoric and exclusion as a survival strategy in the marketised system. Off-rolling becomes a "policy technology", an unofficial but functionally embedded method for managing reputational risk. Using the concept of subjectivation[7], they show how headteachers are both governed and govern themselves in line with neoliberal ideals, navigating rugged moral terrain (Done & Knowler, 2022).

These accounts challenge the notion of informal exclusion as solely a failure of leadership or poor policy implementation. Instead, exclusion is shown to be actively produced, legitimised, and rationalised through systems of governance. However, Foucault's emphasis on decentralised power has been critiqued for offering limited tools to engage with ethical or material claims. As Foucault suggests, if all truths are effects of power (Foucault, 1980), then the grounds for contesting injustice can feel destabilised. Scholars such as Ball (2013) have argued that while poststructuralist

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[7] A poststructuralist concept which refers to how subjects are produced through discourses (Wille et al., 2015).

critique illuminates how power circulates, it must be complemented by normative commitments to justice, equity, and structural change.

4.4.2.1 Constructions of Discipline

The literature problematises how dominant constructions of discipline shape and legitimise exclusionary practice. Drawing from different theoretical traditions, the literature offers critiques of how punishment is conceptualised and justified in educational contexts. Parsons (2005) draws parallels between retributive punishment and school exclusion practices. Retributive justice refers to a system of beliefs which believes that injustice should be rectified by blame and punishment (Smith & Warneken, 2016). Educational policy in England is proposed to mirror broader social welfare and criminal justice ideologies, which reflect a cultural preference for individual blame over systemic responsibility (Parsons, 2005). Parsons notes that policy discourse is steeped in a welfare ideology that categorises children as either deserving or undeserving and reinforces punitive logic that casts young people as morally deficient rather than structurally marginalised. Parsons argues that such discourses embed exclusion within a wider 'will to punish' where policy decisions reflect not just educational values but societal attitudes toward young people, social worth, and punishment. The paper proposes a shift toward a rights-based policy approach that prioritises discourses of civic rights and human dignity to offset this logic. Rizvi (2024) highlights the racial neutrality of Parson's analysis, which neglects the racialised processes of who is rendered punishable.

Done et al. (2021) suggest a slightly different interpretation of discipline, proposing that the 'manage and discipline' model of behaviour management functions as a technology of governmentality (Foucault, 1977). Under this interpretation, disciplinary

school exclusion is proposed to serve as an ever-present threat through which children are ordered and controlled. Importantly, they note that differentiating punitive discipline models for children with SEND does not equate to implementing inclusive practice. Instead, it risks simply differentiating young people from their peers whilst failing to challenge the underlying punitive logic of the model itself.

McKee (2023) offers a philosophical contribution centred on the moral ethics of school-based punishment. His paper critiques the assumption that punishment is necessary for sustaining educational order. It is proposed that punishment is a normative rather than moral practice, which is justified by a belief that these behavioural practices are required to maintain compliance. In this framing, discipline becomes less about correction and more about preserving the fantasy of educational order. All three papers call for a reorientation away from punitive logic and open space for interrogating why schools punish, who is rendered punishable, and what educational values are being upheld or obscured in the process.

4.4.2.2 Race, Governance and Discipline

The literature also examines how systems of power and governance are intertwined with the racialised logic of the state. Building on prior accounts that describe race as a social construct, these papers argue that race functions as a tool of governance used to other. This mechanism of racial governance is proposed to operate through surveillance, securitisation[8], and bordering[9] (Kulz, 2019; Rizvi, 2024).

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[8] Securitisation refers to the ways in which governments or political actors use language and discourse to construct what is a security issue (Wæver, 2004).
[9] Bordering is defined within critical theory approaches as the creation and maintenance of boundaries as guided by power dynamics. These boundaries can be social, political, or economic. (Parker & Vaughn-Williams, 2014).

Rizvi (2024) offers an original theoretical contribution by theorising how school exclusion operates within a broader picture of racial governance. The postcolonial framework of unruliness (Sheth, 2009) is applied to highlight how race is not just viewed as a socially constructed marker of identity but as a state technology or tool for political management. This tool differentiates who is considered governable versus who is deemed a threat to the social order. Within this framework, racialised children are constructed as unruly subjects and subjected to disproportionate surveillance, suspicion, and exclusion.

While Rizvi's contribution is theoretical, it complements Kulz's (2019) research which utilises the accounts of parents and headteachers to explore how neoliberal and securitisation agendas converge in everyday school practice. Zero tolerance behaviour policies, performance frameworks, and safeguarding duties, such as Prevent, are proposed to create a climate in which Black and Muslim students are constructed as risks to be managed. This reflects a broader securitisation agenda, which cannot be uncoupled from racist intent (Kulz, 2019). The interview data is interpreted as reflecting discourses of 'criminal blackness', placing some students within a carceral gaze. In this securitised framework, exclusion becomes an active mode of racialised social control, legitimised through discourses of safety, standards, and school improvement.

Both authors reject the idea that educational policy is neutral. Rather than framing exclusion as a failure of policy or a breakdown in inclusion, they position it as a function of a racial state. National policy agendas, such as counterterrorism legislation (e.g., Prevent), immigration enforcement (e.g. the Borders Act), and carceral policies, are proposed to intersect with education to define the boundaries of

citizenship and belonging. This is exemplified by Kulz's account of the wrongful

exclusion of a Muslim student who became the subject of Islamophobic suspicion

under the Prevent duty, highlighting how racialised suspicion becomes embedded in

safeguarding practice (Kulz, 2019). Similarly, Rizvi (2024) critiques safeguarding

frameworks, arguing they operate as bordering tools that reinforce who is protected

and who is punished.

Rizvi (2024) addresses the role of the EP, urging the profession to critically examine

its position within exclusionary structures and to further engage with race-literate

theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the impact of broader socio-political forces.

Without this shift, the profession could risk reinforcing narratives that depoliticise

exclusion and obscure its structural roots (Rizvi, 2024).

4.5 Examining Inclusion in Relation to Exclusion

Some of the literature discusses inclusion in opposition to exclusionary policies and

practices. Cole et al. (2019) draw on the works of Slee (2011) to frame inclusion as a

challenge to dominant structures of exclusion. This section explores how inclusion is

enacted in relation to exclusion and the tensions this produces. It is acknowledged

that a broader body of inclusion-focused literature lies beyond the scope of this

review.

4.5.1 Policy Enactment and Inclusion

As discussed in relation to the political economies of exclusion, policy contexts are

implicated in influencing exclusionary practice (Thompson et al., 2021; Power &

Taylor, 2021; Daniels & Thompson, 2024; McCluskey et al., 2019; 2024). The

literature also proposes that these policy contexts shape what inclusion looks like and how it's interpreted and enacted. In England, academic performance and behaviour management are prioritised, often at the expense of inclusive education, even when the policy context espouses both values (Thompson et al. 2021).

Tawell (2025) extends this line of enquiry by examining the implementation of exclusion policy in English local contexts. Rather than offering a blanket critique of national policy, it is proposed that schools and LAs navigate complex and often contradictory pressures. The research combines ethnographic observations in LA offices and interviews with headteachers to capture the factors that impact exclusionary decision-making. Factors such as leadership, inter-school collaboration, and LA support are proposed to support the prioritisation of inclusion. The study highlights the ways in which inclusion is lived, constrained, and sometimes defended at the local level in spite of a conflicting national policy context. There is a suggestion that policy analysis in research needs to account for contextual factors of resourcing and infrastructure as mediating inclusion and exclusion.

Power and Taylor (2021) examine localised policy enactment in a Welsh context. Wales broadly takes up a rights-based perspective in policy, which emphasises inclusion and well-being, framed by references to the Equality Act 2010 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. While exclusion rates in Wales are lower, they propose that inclusive policy rhetoric does not always translate into equitable practice. Power and Taylor highlight the complexity of implementing inclusionary policy, noting that the pressures to reduce exclusions often result in hidden exclusionary practices which disproportionately affect children with SEND and those facing multiple disadvantages (McCluskey et al., 2016). Using the policy

cycle framework (Bowe & Ball, 1992), Power and Taylor (2021) analysed the gap between policy discourse and local enactment. This method examines how policy is interpreted and implemented and what factors might create 'slippage' between discourse and action. While Wales's inclusive rhetoric aims to promote equity, hidden exclusions such as managed moves and inclusion units persist as schools navigate the challenges of limited funding and performance-driven metrics. Localised systemic pressures and resource constraints were implicated as mediators in the application of policy. McCluskey et al. (2024) highlight similarities in the Scottish context, in which policy, while rhetorically committed to inclusion, still depends on how well resources, professional cultures, and systemic agendas are aligned. Concluding that even in foregrounding welfare-based, preventative approaches, forms of exclusion still function as a disciplinary tool and that UNCRC commitments have not yet eradicated disproportionality within exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2024).

This raises questions about the interplay between policy discourse and material conditions and the importance of analysing both to understand how systemic inequalities are reproduced or challenged. Drawing attention to local-level variations in policy enactment helped identify the impact of disparities in resourcing, infrastructure, and staffing, which inevitably influence schools' capacity to support vulnerable students even within an inclusive policy context. This dual focus on discourse and material conditions reveals how structural inequities manifest differently depending on regional context, access to resources, and community needs. By examining these localised dynamics, disparities that are obscured in macro-level analyses are illuminated, suggesting the need for a unified yet adaptable framework for policy implementation. Together, these studies indicate that policy discourse is one piece of a broader mosaic in addressing exclusion.

A solution to the above contention might be found in the adoption of a broader justice-oriented lens. McCluskey et al. (2016) also focus on the Welsh context drawing upon Nancy Fraser's (2000) work on the recognition of difference. They applied this framework to analyse the persistent overrepresentation of disadvantaged SEND students in exclusionary practices within a seemingly inclusive policy context. Fraser's framework proposes that justice must focus both on recognition of difference as well as the egalitarian redistribution of resources, criticising the ways in which bids for justice have prioritised recognition over redistribution (Fraser, 2003**).** In applying this to exclusion, McCluskey et al. argue that the focus on recognising categories of needs has overshadowed efforts to address the socio-political factors that intersect with exclusion. This expansion of categories, though celebrated as an indicator of progress, has created a hierarchy in which some groups can more effectively lobby for resources**.** This has left children with other vulnerabilities, such as lowered socio-economic status or being 'looked after', misrecognised and subject to displacement through exclusionary practice. McCluskey et al. (2016) conclude that efforts to eradicate exclusion should be placed on tackling inequality rather than focusing on difference, suggesting that when inclusive policies adopt a universalist approach, they risk failing to meet the specific needs and experiences of disadvantaged groups.

Power and Taylor's (2021) findings complement this perspective, demonstrating how these inequities emerge in local policy enactment in Wales. Despite efforts to reduce exclusion, meaningful inclusion requires policies to go beyond symbolic gestures or inclusive discourses toward addressing structural inequities and resource disparities in both national and local contexts. The research bridges the gap between policy ideals and their real-word enactment, offering an insight to how policies could move

beyond espoused inclusion toward a more socially-just enactment of inclusion that addresses inequality (McCluskey et al., 2016).

4.5.2 Rights-Based Approaches to Inclusion

Caslin (2021) and Done et al. (2021) highlight how systemic pressures to preserve the classroom environment and utilitarian prioritisation of the majority's perceived needs also leads to the removal of students whose presence is considered disruptive. These practices reinforce systemic inequities, and side-line marginalised students in favour of preserving the status quo. Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2022) discuss this practice from a human rights perspective, criticising the 'many versus few' approach taken in exclusionary decision-making. This approach prioritises the rights of the majority over individual students, a practice they argue undermines the principles of justice and equity. The authors emphasise the complexity and interconnectedness of rights within educational settings and how removals from the classroom, purportedly made in the name of communal justice, fail to ensure the rights of the excluded young person. They highlight how the right to access mainstream education for those without disability is often prioritised over students with SEND, reflecting structural inequities that compromise the principle of inclusion. This principle is reflected in English educational policy, which is more centrally concerned with protecting the rights of others to learn without disruption (Power & Taylor, 2024).

Wales is held up as a model of rights-based education due to its formal commitment to the UNCRC; however, a critical discourse analysis reveals silences and tensions within policy and practice (Power & Taylor, 2024). While children's rights are foregrounded rhetorically, this discourse is only partially embedded in practice. In

policy excluded children's rights are captured, but there is no mention of the rights of their peers or the class teacher. Power & Taylor (2024) also highlight how school rules, such as the implementation of uniforms, contradict some of the core principles underpinning a rights-based framework.

Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2022) advocate for the adoption of the '3Cs model' (Figure 3) to guide ethical decision-making related to exclusion. However, this model does not consider the impact of implicit bias in decision making. An important consideration, as the research highlights bias in exclusionary practices as related to race, disability, and socio-economic status (Done et al.,2021). Without addressing or acknowledging these biases rights-based frameworks risk replicating these inequalities in decision making. The efficacy of implementing a 3C's model in exclusionary decision-making processes has not yet been investigated through empirical research and remains an avenue for further exploration.

Figure 3. The 3Cs model of resolving conflicts of rights at school (Gillet-Swan & Lundy, 2022).

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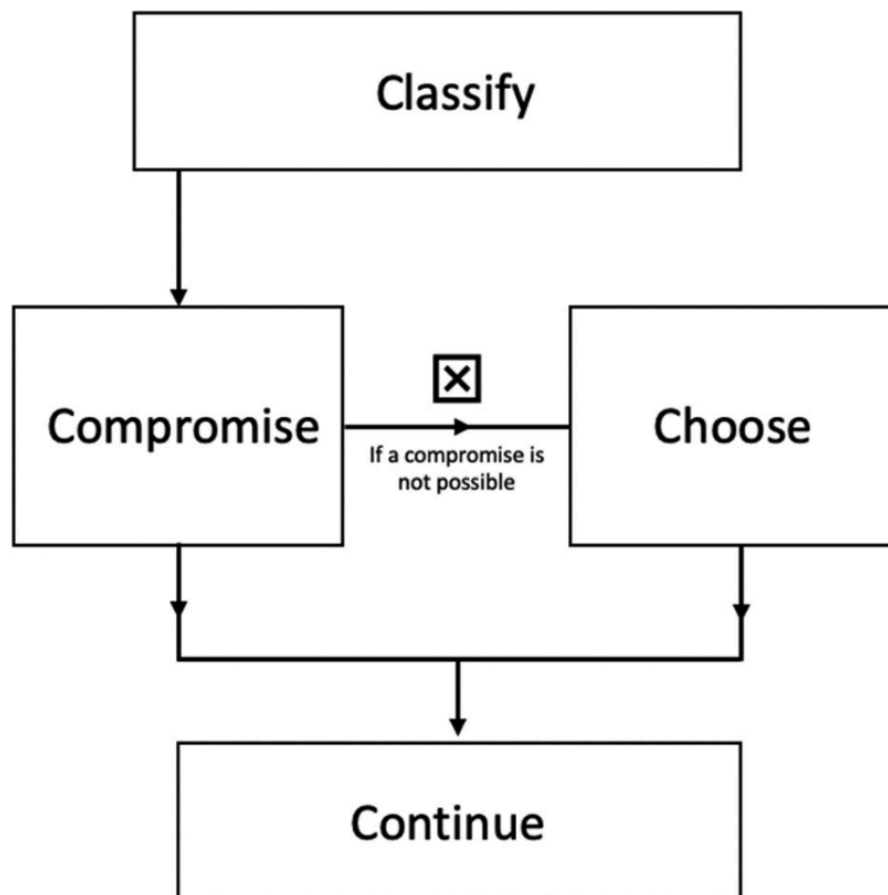
Papers which consider rights-based approaches to inclusion raise questions about how exclusion is used to preserve the classroom environment, which could be proposed to link to performance-based policy pressures highlighted by other papers within the review. Together, these studies urge educators and policymakers to rethink the balance between communal justice and individual rights.

4.6 Chapter Summary

School exclusion is a complex and layered phenomenon shaped by intersecting structural, ideological, and political forces. The application of a range of theoretical frames and methodologies supported a nuanced understanding of contributory factors which influence and maintain a continuum of exclusionary practices. While

terms such as equity and inclusion frequently appeared as normative aims within the literature, there was a lack of explicit engagement with how they could be reached. A gap remains as to what a vision of educational justice might look like in a system which does not utilise exclusion, highlighting a need for a more direct engagement with how the systems of power and normative logics which legitimise exclusion can be confronted.

Despite the wide range of contributory factors discussed, links were not always made between structural, systemic, and interpersonal domains. The emphasis on macro-level factors, systems of power and normativity has implications for what socially just practice might look like and how practitioners can work toward this. The literature was largely dominated by educational and sociological perspectives, leaving a gap for psychologically informed papers and EP voice. Perhaps highlighting the need for the profession to offer a more politically engaged contribution in relation to school exclusion. The current research study aims to apply an abolitionist lens to critically examine the ecology of exclusion. In attending to systems of power it moves beyond aims to reduce exclusion toward questioning the logics and structures of power which make exclusion thinkable in the first place.

4.6.1 Reflexive Note

The process of developing the themes and conclusions within this literature review was shaped by a messy, non-linear, and inductive process of reading, grouping, and sense-making. Rather than beginning with a fixed conceptual framework, the themes emerged through engagement with the literature and attempted to reflect and capture the diverse, overlapping, and interconnected forces that contribute to and sustain exclusionary practice. Inevitably, my own understanding of and commitments to social justice influenced how I

read, interpreted, and organised the material. Retrospectively, the use of a pre-existing social justice framework- such as Nancy Fraser's tripartite model of justice, cited at the beginning of this review- might have offered a more structured analytic framework, While this review was designed as a narrative scoping review, as opposed to having a comparative function, applying a framework could have helped to more explicitly capture economic, cultural, and political dimensions of injustice across the literature and supported a clearer mapping of their overlaps and tensions.

Methodology

5.1 Research Rationale and Purpose

Irrespective of the lens applied, both academic literature and national statistics demonstrate that school exclusion disproportionately and pervasively affects racialised, disabled, and working-class students (Graham, 2014; Caslin, 2021; Power and Taylor, 2021). The impact is far-reaching, with long-term consequences across health, education, employment, and the criminal justice system. While several studies frame exclusion as an issue of social justice, they often focus on how structural inequalities influence exclusionary practice without questioning the legitimacy of exclusion altogether.

Even in policy contexts where formal exclusion is discouraged, 'grey' forms of exclusion persist and continue to impact the same marginalised groups disproportionately (McCluskey et al., 2016; Done et al., 2021; Power & Taylor, 2021; Daniels & Thompson, 2024). Within the English context, much of the literature focuses on mitigating the number of exclusions, rather than dismantling the conditions that sustain and legitimise exclusion (Gill et al., 2017; Daniels & Thompson, 2024). In a recent policy update, the Arranging Alternative Provision legislation (DfE, 2025b) positions APs as an interventive mechanism to reduce exclusionary risk. However, this risks individualising support and sidestepping a deeper interrogation of inclusion in mainstream settings, raising questions about whether such moves represent forms of educational segregation rather than inclusion (Perera, 2020; Rizvi, 2024; Thomas, 2025). Systematic reviews evaluating

the impact of school-based interventions (Dean, 2022; Valdebenito et al., 2018) have also highlighted the limited and often short-lived impact on reducing exclusion. This may be partly owed to the fact that these interventions are rarely designed to challenge the wider policy contexts, structural disadvantages, or ideological conditions in which exclusion is embedded.

While some studies have drawn on frameworks from critical race theory, poststructuralism, and disability studies to deepen analysis, no UK-based research to date has examined school exclusion through an abolitionist lens. This is poignant considering the growing recognition of exclusion's role in the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al.,2015; Graham, 2016) and the parallels drawn between broader systems of punishment, surveillance, and state control (Kulz, 2019; Rizvi, 2024). However, no studies explore what it would mean to build an education system without exclusion, even the critically positioned papers stop at critique, leaving a gap for prefigurative exploration. Applying an abolitionist lens offers the potential to dismantle exclusionary structures and imagine alternatives rooted in justice, care, and community accountability (Gilmore, 2007; Davis, 2003).

Despite the psychological implications of exclusion, they remain under-theorised from a social justice perspective. The EP voice is notably absent from critical literature about the structural conditions that produce exclusion. This may reflect a broader tension in applied psychology between individualised intervention and systemic transformation, signalling a need for greater political engagement within educational psychology to further develop socially just approaches (Corcoran & Vassallo, 2024).

5.1.2 Research Aims and Questions

This research explores what it means to reimagine an education system without exclusionary practices. Rather than proposing reformist solutions that seek to fix the system from within, this research uses the accounts of community activists to critically examine what might need to be dismantled and what alternative structures and practices could be built in its place. In centring grassroots perspectives, the research challenges dominant discourses of discipline, normativity, and behaviour, and asks what educational structures rooted in care and transformative justice might look like. It seeks to further research in the field of critical educational psychology and contribute to the development of politically reflexive and socially just psychological practice.

The following research questions guide the research:

Overarching question:

- How does an abolitionist lens generate alternative understandings of the school exclusion system and its associated practices?

Sub questions:

- What conditions create and sustain exclusionary practice, and what might need to be deconstructed or dismantled?
- What alternative structures and practice-based changes are necessary to support an education system which does not rely on exclusion?

5.2 Researcher Worldview and Positioning Statement

There is no tidy origin story to offer, nor a single moment that pinpoints my trajectory toward activism, abolition or writing this thesis. Rather, it is shaped by an accumulation of unlearning, learning, and re-learning, an ongoing journey that will undoubtedly last a lifetime. If I were to name one constant during this journey, it would be a sense of rebellion and criticality, principles I have carried from my teens into my training today. They have served as sources of both celebration and contention, but above all, they act as a reminder to refuse to accept systems and structures which perpetuate harm, alongside a driver of hope and determination to build something better.

Put simply, my politics and philosophy operate on the principle that we are not free until we are all free. A premise powerfully articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1977), a Black feminist organisation that obliterated the premise of selective struggle. Their vision demanded an integrated analysis which dismantles all systems of oppression- capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy-along with a steadfast commitment to collective liberation. A process which requires an understanding that the freedom of one group does not come at the expense of another. I believe liberation is not an abstract ideal but a lived practice of collective resistance across borders, identities, and movements. Witnessing the atrocities committed against Palestinians in Gaza has irrevocably shaped my understanding of the world. It has been a source of devastation and rage, as well as a galvanising force against state violence and repression.

The phrase that originally inspired this thesis, 'Let this radicalize you rather than lead you to despair' (Kaba, n.d.), became a guiding principle, offering clarity amid grief

and urgency amid hopelessness. Ongoing conversations in my organising circles have reinforced my understanding of how capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism function as interconnected systems which sustain global hegemony. In moments of frustration, I returned to Mike Davis' words, "*Fight with hope, fight without hope, but fight absolutely*" (Davis, 2019). My hope is not naïve. It is rooted in the certainty that resisting these systems is a necessary and worthwhile fight. Something that grounds and propels this work forward.

My entry point into activism and political organising was through socialism. Growing up in a predominantly white, working-class town and being the first of my family to attend university, class divides were the most visible and tangible differences I experienced. While Marxism handed me the tools to critique capitalism, I found its rejection of intersectionality to be limiting and class-reductionist. Many of the socialist circles I attended felt theoretically engaged but detached from direct action, which nudged me toward grassroots movements focusing on mutual aid and collective action. My involvement in an anti-raids group, a network that builds community resistance against immigration raids, has provided a real-time example of solidarity and community empowerment. Whether running outreach stalls, visiting asylum accommodation to offer solidarity, or physically resisting immigration raids, this work has shown me the transformative power of collective action. Being present in these spaces has reinforced my belief that liberation cannot be theorised in isolation but must be practised with those most affected by injustice.

As an abolitionist, I am driven by the belief that police, prisons, and borders are not systems that can be reformed, but must be dismantled. These institutions operate in the service of capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism, which function to control

and oppress marginalised communities. The education system resides within this ecosystem, and I believe that exclusionary practices mirror the punitive logic of policing and imprisonment. For me, abolition is both a critique of these interconnected systems and a commitment to imagining and building transformative alternatives that prioritise care, accountability, and collective well-being. Abolition has taught me to refuse the dominant markers of justice, rethink what constitutes harm, and continues to push me to imagine and reimagine the world.

I was drawn to Educational Psychology based on its stated commitment to social justice and inclusion. However, training has surfaced some tensions between these principles, and the dominant individualised and depoliticised frameworks which often underpin theory and practice. This has been coupled with a looming feeling that I do not fit the mould of an EP- whatever that is! My inclination to speak openly about structural injustice in the world has felt polarising, even alienating. I found myself wrestling with the feeling that I might need to soften myself for others. While uncomfortable, it has taught me a valuable lesson in bringing others alongside, while not compromising my values and beliefs. I have come to view this tension as my unique contribution to the role, pushing me to find ways to embody and carry out acts of radical resistance even in small everyday ways.

I have sought alternative frameworks that align with my political and ethical commitments. Community psychology has offered a way to think systemically and relationally, prioritising social action, whilst critical psychology encourages a relentless interrogation of the assumptions embedded in psychological theory and practice. Together, their commitments to action inspire a different way of practising psychology, requiring a critical gaze on the profession itself and a refusal to collude

with the very systems we seek to challenge. Writing this thesis has not just been an academic exercise, but an act of resistance. It is a critique of the education system and a contribution to its reimagination. A reminder to myself that my work as a psychologist does not have to be confined by existing expectations but can contribute to the broader fight for justice and liberation.

5.3 Research Paradigm

Research methods are guided by paradigms that dictate the philosophical positioning of the researcher, the nature of what can be known, and how knowledge can be reached (Clark, 1998). A critical paradigm foregrounds power relations, ideology, and socio-political conditions that structure knowledge production (Stetsenko, 2014). It rejects the notion of neutral or objective research, recognising that knowledge is inherently political and shaped by struggles over meaning and power. Within this paradigm, research should engage in ideological critique (Brookfield, 2005) and challenge taken-for-granted power structures (Assalahi, 2015).

 In direct opposition to positivist assumptions that obscure structural inequality and systemic oppression (Creswell, 2013), critical research insists that scholarship should not only describe oppression but also actively contribute to its dismantling and transformation (Mertens, 2010). This research is both critical and transformative, engaging with an abolitionist lens to go beyond exploring inequalities to actively imagine educational systems and practices built on the principles of justice and care.

5.3.1 Abolitionist Lens

A theoretical lens provides a framework for constructing knowledge and an anchor for research design, methodology, and analysis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Critical lenses support a researcher in examining structural conditions, social relations, and broader systems of power (Reeves et al. 2008). Abolition is a theoretical framework and a form of praxis that emerges from historical struggles against systems of racialised subjugation, specifically in the insurgency against chattel slavery and the dismantling of the transatlantic slave trade (Rodriguez, 2019). It centres on an understanding of racial capitalism, a concept that refers to the mutual dependence of capitalism and racism (Melamed, 2015).

Abolition has expanded into a broader critique of carceral logics, which refers to the state-sanctioned mechanisms of containment, control, and punishment that are prioritised over transformative solutions (Kaba & Meiners, 2014). From the latter half of the 20th century, penal abolitionism gained traction as scholars and activists interrogated the prison-industrial complex (Figure 2) (Davis, 2003). A term that describes an industry of overlapping institutions operating in the interest of control, punishment, and surveillance (Davis, 2003). Institutions such as schools, welfare systems, and immigration enforcement are embedded within these structures and are proposed to shape and sustain racial and economic hierarchies (Coles et al., 2021).

Figure 4 *The Prison Industrial Complex*
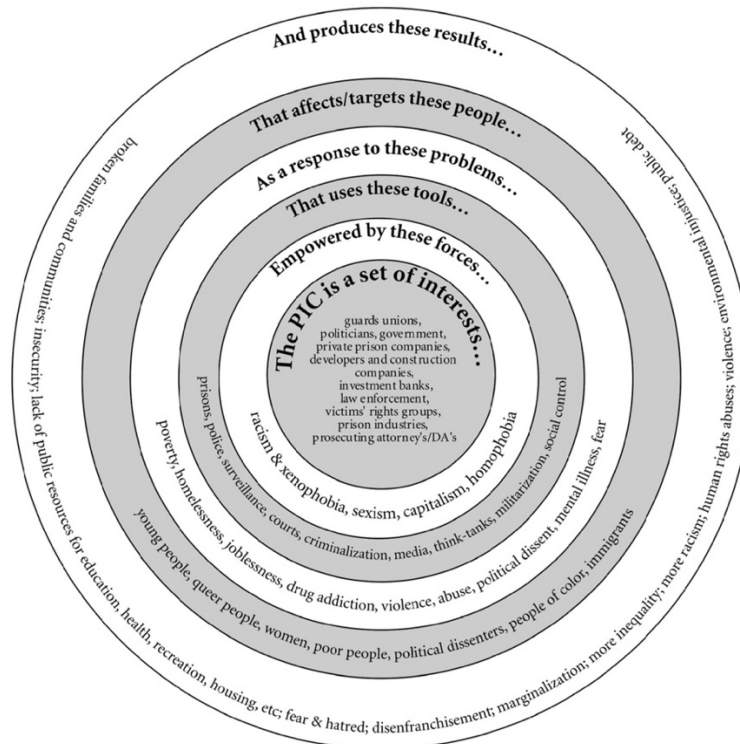
Note. From *What is the PIC? What is Abolition?*, by Critical Resistance, n.d.

https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/ in the public

domain.

Although abolition was first applied in academia within criminological studies, it has

since been applied within disability studies (Ben-Moshe, 2020), education (Meiners,

2016), and social work (Toraif & Mueller, 2023). This expansion is based on

recognising that the logic of exclusion, disposability, and punitive discipline is not just

confined to prisons but permeates multiple social institutions (Ben-Moshe, 2020;

Meiners, 2016). Through this lens, schools, like prisons, function as sites of

discipline and social control, where those deemed 'disruptive' are systematically

removed from educational spaces (Coles et al., 2021), reproducing racial, economic,

and ableist hierarchies (Rodríguez, 2019).

Abolitionist research is not just about critique but also actively dismantling punitive structures and constructing life-affirming alternatives (Gilmore, 2007; Kaba & Murakawa, 2021). This study moves beyond reformist efforts to make exclusion 'fairer' or 'better regulated' and instead asks what education might look like if exclusion were abolished. This commitment is reflected in the analysis and methodology.

5.3.2 Ontology

Ontology refers to how we understand the nature of truth, reality, and beliefs about what is knowable (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It asks questions of whether there is an objective world which exists outside human consciousness or whether realities are constructed and shaped by experience and interpretation (Willig, 2008). Ontological positions span between the antithetical positions of realism and relativism. Realism posits a single observable, objective, and measurable reality (Willig, 2013), while relativism proposes multiple realities and truths which are shaped by the subjectivity of experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, these are not rigid binaries, and many ontological positions, including this one, occupy the space in between.

This research adopts a critical realist ontology. It challenges the dichotomy between absolute objectivity and radical subjectivity by proposing that there is an external reality, but this reality and our understanding of it are always mediated by social, cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts (Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark et al., 2002). Critical realism allows for exploring social structures in relation to human

agency, acknowledging that while social structures influence people's actions, they are also susceptible to transformation (Bhaskar, 2008).

This perspective recognises that the school exclusion system has material consequences, while recognising that these practices are legitimised through discourse, policies, and ideology. Thus, reality is both material in that exclusions happen and have observable impacts, and ideological, as the reasons given for exclusion reflect and reproduce dominant power structures.

Within this ontology, school exclusion is not viewed as an inevitable outcome or an unavoidable fact of schooling but as socially, politically, and historically contingent, meaning it can be contested and transformed (Rodríguez, 2019). Freire (1970) discusses critical realism and notes that the "*world and human beings do not exist apart from one another; they exist in constant interaction*" (p. 25). He emphasises that social reality is not transformed by chance, but through conscious human action; thus, if social systems are produced through historical processes, they can also be actively reshaped. This aligns with an abolitionist stance, which does not seek merely to describe and critique the conditions of exclusion but to intervene in the conditions that sustain it, demanding a reconfiguration of the conditions that make exclusion possible (Meiners, 2016).

5.3.3 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and how we come to understand reality (Ali-Saadi, 2014). This study adopts the position that knowledge is socially situated, historically contingent, and politically mediated. It takes up a dual epistemological approach, integrating both social constructionism and abolitionist

epistemology to align with its critical and transformative aims. A critical realist ontology permits epistemological relativism (Bhaskar, 1989), recognising that while material structures shape lived experiences, our understanding of them is mediated through discourse, ideology, and positionality (Burr, 2004).

Social constructionism suggests that knowledge is not 'discovered', but co-constructed through social processes, language, culture, and history (Burr, 2004). It challenges the notion of 'truth' as a fixed or objective reality, instead, viewing concepts and categories as socially and historically contingent rather than natural features of the world (Burr & Dick, 2017). In this study, participants are understood not as isolated knowledge holders but as critically positioned within a socio-political context in which they interrogate and resist school exclusion. When applied critically, social constructionism emphasises that knowledge is inherently value-laden and requires an interrogation of how power operates in shaping dominant discourses (Burr, 2015). To fully comprehend observable phenomena, such as exclusion, it is necessary to examine the underlying ideological and structural forces that produce and sustain them (Archer, 2013).

This research extends beyond critique to engage in abolitionist knowledge production, which resists fixing problems within existing systems and instead engages with future building through abolitionist imaginaries, reflecting Levitas's (2013) proposal of Utopia as a method[10]. Aligning with the concept of dis-epistemology, abolition rejects dominant knowledge systems constrained by the logics of what is deemed 'possible' or 'realistic' (Ben-Moshe, 2018) and pushes for a

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[10] Utopia as a method is a way in which to conceive an alternative future. It does not construe utopia as a goal but a means to develop holistic and reflexive approaches to shape what might be possible. (Levitas, 2013).

radical openness to alternative ways of knowing. Abolitionist research mirrors activist traditions of praxis, where knowledge is co-constructed, experimental, and always in conversation with movements for justice.

While abolitionist epistemology risks being criticised for its rejection of reformist frameworks and its embrace of speculative or utopian thinking (Ben-Moshe, 2018), it is precisely this refusal to be constrained by dominant epistemic limits that makes it a transformative approach (Rodríguez, 2019). It is not utopian in the sense of being detached from reality but in the Freirean sense of insisting on the possibility of a world beyond oppression (Freire, 1970). This study navigates these tensions by integrating critical realism's attention to material structures with abolition's prefigurative approach.

5.5 Method

5.5.1 Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative research explores human experiences, supporting an understanding of how people interpret and make sense of phenomena (Maxwell, 2013). Unlike quantitative methods prioritising measurement and generalisability, qualitative inquiry allows for a deeper engagement with complex social and psychological phenomena (Kuo & Wallace, 2020) and is suitable for facilitating a rich exploration of school exclusion within its multi-layered social and political context. Specifically, it undertakes critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2016), which is explicitly concerned with challenging dominant ideologies, deconstructing systems of oppression, and producing politically engaged and action-oriented knowledge. This approach supports the researcher in asking

questions about social and psychological structures and processes, generating themes that identify sites for change.

5.5.2 Identifying and Recruiting Participants

Abolitionist research requires engagement with those resisting oppressive systems (Coles et al. 2021). Purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) was used to recruit participants from grassroots and community groups involved in anti-exclusion work. This approach enabled the inclusion of participants with contextual and critical knowledge of school exclusion, while also ensuring a level of homogeneity required for a successful focus group (Gilflores and Alonso, 1995). The inclusion criteria were:

- Self-identification as being engaged in anti-exclusion work through direct activism, community organising, research, or advocacy.
- Affiliation with a grassroots or community organisation working to challenge school exclusion.

Recruitment was undertaken through direct outreach to groups known to the researcher via email, online forums, and word-of-mouth. A recruitment poster outlining the research's aims and inclusion criteria was shared (Appendix C), which organisations could circulate at their discretion. Participation was explicitly framed as individual, not representative of any organisation. As the researcher is a member of some of the organisations contacted, people with whom she has a personal relationship with were exempt from participating in the study. Interested individuals who contacted the researcher were sent a participant information sheet (Appendix D) Those still interested following reading this were sent a consent form outlining their

right to withdraw, confidentiality, and information about publication. All participants were required to sign the consent form before the focus groups took place.

Focus group size recommendations vary, but four to six participants are generally considered optimal for generating rich data while remaining manageable (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Groups larger than eight can risk limited participation and create difficulties in transcription accuracy (Willig, 2008). In line with these recommendations, a limit of four to eight participants was set. Following the recruitment, four participants took part in the study.

While demographic data such as race, gender or locations were not formally collected within the research, this decision was made with care and intentionality. Rather than fragmenting the participants into identity categories, the research centred a shared characteristic of political resistance. This is not to deny the importance of intersectionality, participants insights were undoubtedly shaped by their varying experiences across systems of exclusion. However, the focus is on what emerged through collective dialogue, the shared ideas, the tensions, and solidarities forged through struggle. The emphasis was placed on the conditions under which resistance is voiced and knowledge is co-produced, rather than on individual positionality.

5.6 Data Collection

5.6.1 Focus Groups

Participants participated in two focus groups. Powell and Single (1996) describe focus groups as gatherings of individuals, chosen by a researcher, to collectively discuss a research topic based on their personal experiences. Unlike group

interviews, focus groups rely on communication among participants, encouraging

collaborative meaning-making and the co-construction of knowledge (Kidd & Krall,

2005). They were chosen for their alignment with the study's social constructionist

epistemology, which views knowledge as co-produced through dialogue, reflection,

and interaction (Burr, 2015). This also mirrors abolitionist commitments to collective

knowledge production, where insights emerge through communal struggle and

imagination rather than top-down expertise (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Meiners, 2016).

Focus groups provided space for participants to critique the exclusion system while

simultaneously engaging in creative, collaborative work of imagining alternatives.

The focus group was designed to create a space where participants could build on

one another's reflections, generating a kind of 'hive mind' through which deeper

understandings of harm and possibility could emerge. This synergy of voices

produced a collective strength, capable of interrogating dominant discourses and

pushing back against the hegemonic logics embedded within exclusionary education

systems. In contrast to methodologies that individualise data or constrain radical

critique, this collective approach makes space for exploration without constraint.

The researcher initially proposed face-to-face focus groups to support relationship

building and management of group dynamics. However, since participants were

geographically dispersed across the UK, online sessions enhanced accessibility,

reducing logistical barriers, such as travel time, cost, and scheduling conflicts. While

online settings can present challenges to organic discussions (Liamputtong, 2011),

steps were taken to mitigate these concerns. Participants were sent information

sheets (Appendices E) two days before each focus group outlining group guidance

and discussion topics. This preparatory step allowed time for reflection and

established shared expectations for collaborative engagement. Online group discussions can sometimes pose difficulties in managing group dynamics (Hughes & Lang, 2004), therefore clear group agreements and facilitation strategies were established in advance to ensure respectful and generative dialogue.

5.6.2 Interview Schedule

The interview schedule (Appendices F) was structured across two sessions. The first focused on a critique of exclusion and the second on imagining alternatives. This sequencing was intentional, as starting with critique was intended to create cognitive and emotional space for visionary thinking (hooks, 1994). Each session began with a single open-ended question to encourage broad participant-led discussion. The structure allowed participants to shape the conversation, minimise researcher influence and centre participant perspectives. The researcher's role was facilitative rather than directive, encouraging organic dialogue while intervening only when necessary to pose follow-up questions, invite quieter voices, or refocus discussions if needed.

5.6.3 Procedure

Both focus groups took place on Microsoft Teams, lasting ninety minutes each. The researcher began each session with an introduction exercise to support participant connection and trust-building (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017). At the start of each focus group, consent forms were re-read, the group guidance was reiterated, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw. The focus group was recorded using Microsoft Teams' built-in voice-to-text transcription function. After each session, the transcription was anonymised and manually checked for accuracy. The

video recordings were then permanently deleted from the Microsoft Teams application. The final transcripts were securely uploaded to the University of Essex OneDrive. Transcriptions will be stored for ten years in line with the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and the Tavistock NHS Trust's Data Protection Policies. This retention policy was communicated to the participants via the information sheet.

Data Analysis 5.7

4.7.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was implemented per Braun and Clarke's guidance (2021). RTA is a qualitative method used to identify, interpret, and theorise patterns of meaning across a data set. Aligned with a constructionist epistemology, RTA recognises that meaning is constructed and interpreted through researcher engagement with the data, rather than being passively discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It rejects coding reliability measures and emphasises researcher subjectivity and reflexivity as central to the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2019). Its flexibility supports an iterative and theoretically engaged approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RTA allows for inductive and deductive analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2021). An inductive approach was adopted to remain grounded in participants' perspectives, while abolitionist and critical psychology frameworks informed interpretation. RTA's emphasis on reflexivity allowed me to remain attuned to how my positionality shaped what was noticed, prioritised, and made sense of during analysis. Reflexive

engagement was documented throughout the research process using a research

diary (Appendix G).

5.7.1.1 Phases of Analysis

The analysis of the data followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach.

Reflections and interpretations of the data were recorded in the research diary at

each stage for transparency around how codes and themes were reached.

Phase 1- Familiarisation with the data

The first phase involves becoming familiar with the dataset through a process of

immersion. Audio recordings from the focus groups were listened to twice to check

the accuracy of the digital transcription. This transcription was re-read twice, allowing

for immersion in participants' narratives. Following the second reading, notes were

made in the researcher's reflective diary to capture the initial conceptual

understandings concerning the data set as a whole.

Phase 2- Coding the data

The coding phase reflects a process of interpretation by the researcher, capturing

their analytic take of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding prioritises recording

single meanings and concepts instead of fragmenting or theming data into

predefined categories (Braun & Clarke, 2021), helping the analysis remain open-

ended. Coding was carried out at both a semantic and a latent level. Semantic

coding focuses on the explicit meanings in the data, capturing surface-level content

without interpretation beyond their stated meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In

contrast, latent coding examines underlying meanings and assumptions which shape

how a topic is discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This layered approach supported

the generation of codes which are both descriptive and analytically rich.

The data was worked through systematically, line by line, to identify segments

pertinent to the research question, ensuring codes remained flexible and responsive

to emerging patterns. Initial coding was done manually by annotating and

highlighting printed transcripts, using colour coding to link excerpts to each of the

three research questions (Appendix H). Manual coding allowed an intuitive reading

of the dataset. However, I felt that this stunted the extent to which I could be

thorough or avoid repetition with my coding. A second round of coding was

undertaken using NVivo, allowing for refinement of initial codes, better organisation,

and a deeper engagement with latent meanings due to familiarity with the data

(Appendix I). The two-stage process concluded with a total of 548 codes across both

transcripts.

Phase 3- Constructing Initial Themes

This stage focused on identifying shared patterns of meaning within the dataset

concerning the research questions. Braun & Clarke (2021) describe this process as

zooming back out from coding to make sense of the data through organising

concepts. The codes were exported from NVivo and entered into a program called

Miro, where they were populated onto electronic post-it notes, which could be moved

around and grouped. An initial 36 themes were captured (Appendix J). These

themes are reviewed and reconfigured in the next stage of analysis.

Phase 4- Reviewing Potential Themes

Initial themes were reviewed for coherence and relevance to the research questions. This involved revisiting the dataset and assessing whether coded extracts fitted or were representative of the initial themes. Themes were checked to ensure they moved beyond topic summaries and instead reflected patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Themes that were too narrow, overlapping, or lacked coherence were refined or collapsed. Some re-grouping took place manually during this stage (Appendix K). This process resulted in a set of 17 themes and 25 subthemes.

Phase 5- Refining, Defining and Naming

The 17 themes were revisited, and definitions were generated to clarify their scope and boundary. Connections across themes were made, which led to the generation of 5 overarching themes. While Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that overarching themes are not a necessary feature of RTA, they provided a useful organising framework for conveying the complexity and breadth of the dataset. The final thematic structure is captured in Appendix L.

Phase 6- Producing the Report

The write-up of the RTA is presented in Chapter 5, which offers a narrative account of the themes. During this stage, some themes were further collapsed as revisiting the dataset revealed some areas of overlap. The final thematic map is included within the Research Themes chapter (Figure 5). The discussion chapter builds on this analysis by situating the findings in relation to the literature, drawing on psychological theory to deepen understanding.

5.7.2 Alternative Data Analyses Considered

Several alternative methods were considered, and rationales for why they were not selected are discussed below.

5.7.2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was initially explored due to its focus on power, ideology, and language. CDA offers a systematic approach to analysing how discourse constructs, maintains, and legitimises social inequality (Mullet, 2018), which would have positioned it as a useful tool to interrogate narratives around school exclusion. However, it was not selected as CDA is often used to explore how dominant discourses operate to reproduce inequality and oppression (Mullet, 2018). The participants in this research are already critically positioned in relation to these structures. They do not passively consume hegemonic narratives around exclusion, but aim to actively resist, challenge, and dismantle them. The value of this study is not in revealing how exclusion is discursively framed in institutional texts, but in amplifying alternative perspectives that critique, reject, and imagine beyond these dominant narratives.

5.7.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was also considered, as it foregrounds participants' lived experiences and sense-making (Smith et al., 2009). However, IPA is primarily concerned with individual meaning-making, whereas this study is interested in exclusion as a collective, systemic phenomenon. While exclusion is undoubtedly experienced at an individual level, an abolitionist analysis

necessitates an approach that foregrounds structural critique rather than solely personal interpretations (Willig, 2013).

5.7.2.3 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was explored for its generative potential in theorising complex social processes (Charmaz, 2006). While traditional iterations are rooted in positivist assumptions of objectivity and emergent discovery, constructivist adaptations (Charmaz, 2009) align more closely with the research's epistemological stance. However, given the limited literature on abolition and school exclusion in the UK context, grounded theory feels premature. It also limits the extent to which prefigurative future building could be engaged with. As this research seeks to expand conceptual possibilities rather than theory building at this stage, a more exploratory approach was prioritised.

5.7.2.4 Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research was extensively considered due to its commitment to social justice and collective knowledge production (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). As an approach which seeks to dismantle researcher-participant hierarchies and centre community agency, it aligns with abolitionist principles of grassroots organising and transformative change (Fine & Torre, 2019). Despite its alignment with the study's paradigm, the structural constraints of doctoral research**,** such as time limitations and ethical approval constraints**,** have posed challenges to fully realising a participatory framework.

5.8 Quality of Research

Based on the research's critical paradigm, it rejects claims of universal truths related to a single objective reality and therefore, traditional markers of research quality such as reliability, validity, and generalisability are not applied (Burr, 2015). Regardless, constructionist research should be subject to quality evaluation (Madil et al., 2000). Yardley's (2017) four principles for evaluating qualitative research are applied to demonstrate methodological rigour.

5.8.1 Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context involves an awareness of the theoretical, socio-political, and methodological landscape in which the research is situated (Yardley, 2017). The research is explicitly grounded in critical and abolitionist theory, recognising that exclusion is not an isolated issue. This is taken up in how the research explicitly attends to the social, political, and economic systems and spheres of influence. These commitments are embedded in methodological choices and the analytic lens used to interpret participant accounts. An effort has been made to centre the voices of activists and grassroots movements, acknowledging that communities resisting exclusion hold critical knowledge and expertise often marginalised in academic discourse (Coles et al., 2021). Focus groups were selected to decentralise researcher authority and allow participants to collectively challenge, build upon, and refine ideas (Kidd & Krall, 2005). Ideally, I would have liked to share the initial themes with participants for sense-checking. However, this was not possible due to time limitations and participant availability.

5.8.2 Commitment and Rigour

Commitment refers to a sustained engagement with the research topic and data (Yardley, 2017), which has been supported through a long-standing interest in abolition and a personal drive to contribute to educational transformation. This commitment was reflected in sustained immersion in abolitionist literature and broader theoretical traditions such as CRT, disability studies, and community psychology. This has also been reflected in the narrative literature review, which synthesises multiple perspectives on school exclusion, supporting the construction of the research.

Rigour is demonstrated through methodological transparency and ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process. A research journal was maintained throughout the process to document decision-making and interpretation. This was particularly important in navigating the dual role of activist and academic, allowing space to interrogate potential overidentification with participants or themes. RTA was chosen for its alignment with those commitments, permitting flexibility and critical engagement with the data. Regular supervision offered a space for external challenge and accountability, helping to sharpen interpretations and ensure analytical coherence. Rather than striving for neutrality, this research embraces situated knowledge, acknowledging that meaning making is shaped by power, systems, and context (Mertens, 2010).

5.8.3 Transparency and Coherence

Transparency has been maintained by clearly articulating the research process, from design to data analysis. Epistemological and ontological assumptions are clearly stated and linked to the research aim and methodological choices. The research process has also been documented by including evidence and examples in the appendices. Coherence is demonstrated through considered alignment between theoretical frameworks, methodology, and analytic choices. RTA allowed for a politically engaged approach to data generation and analysis. Subjectivity was not treated as a flaw but as an inherent feature of qualitative inquiry, which was made visible and examined throughout the research process (Gough & Madill, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2023). My worldview is made clear at the outset, in which my background and experiences are discussed as a means of supporting the reader to understand to my positioning and personal philosophies.

As an insider researcher, my activist positioning shaped the research in meaningful ways, supporting recruitment, relationship building, and interpretation of the data. It also strengthened trust, access, and depth of engagement. It is acknowledged that as an insider researcher there is potential for bias or leaning into preconceptions (Mercer, 2007). These were offset by ensuring I had no personal relationships with the participants, and my reflexive journal and supervision supported with transparency in interpretation of the data.

5.8.4 Impact and Importance

Yardley (2017) emphasises that qualitative research should have real-world significance, contributing to theoretical advancements, policy discussions, and

practical change. This study responds to a gap in knowledge by applying an abolitionist lens to school exclusion and expanding the scope of critical psychological research. It advances critical engagement with exclusion by challenging state and institutional narratives and positioning school exclusion within broader systems of punishment and control. The knowledge generated has implications for educational, psychological, activist, and community contexts, informing abolitionist approaches to discipline, care, and accountability. It challenges policy discourses that frame exclusion as an unfortunate necessity, offering insights into alternative structures grounded in justice, care, and collective responsibility.

While the study does not claim generalisability in a positivist sense, it prioritises transferability, which refers to the potential for its insights to resonate across contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), namely psychology and education. Rather than seeking objectivity, this study foregrounds critical, reflexive, and politically engaged knowledge production, aligning with abolitionist commitments to not just understanding the world but transforming it. The study commits to sharing its findings in formats which support practical application and critical discussion for psychologists, educators, and community practitioners.

5.9 Ethical Considerations

Research was planned and carried out in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), which lays out a set of principles and guidelines for ethical research. Ethical approval was granted by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee on 10.05.2024. A copy of this form and the subsequent approval letter can be found in Appendix M. Ethical considerations and actions taken to minimise risk are captured in Table 1.

Table 1.

Ethical Considerations and Mitigating Actions.

Ethical consideration	Mitigation
Risk	-Although focus groups can offer a supportive environment to participants (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), the group context might also create a feeling of vulnerability, which might expose participants to harm. To support in mitigating this: -Groups will be homogenous to support in minimising power differences. -Group rules will be co-constructed at the beginning to support group dynamics. -Researcher will apply competent consultation skills in resolving any challenges in the context of the focus group. -Facilitation by the researcher will be centred on enabling participants to feel safe. -Issues centred around school exclusion may be sensitive or political. The researcher will follow focus groups with a

	debrief and be vigilant to the wellbeing of participants. -The researcher will be supervised by a Tavistock staff member who is a qualified psychologist.
Valid Consent	-Informed consent will be gained from each participant when they sign up to the study. Participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage. -More detailed information concerning the study's purpose and the participants role with be provided prior to and on arrival to focus group. -Participants will be able to ask questions concerning the process both before and after the focus group.
Confidentiality	-Due to the nature of the focus group greater emphasis needs to be placed on confidentiality. Participants will be instructed to not share focus group discussions outside of the space.

	-Participants will be explicitly reminded of researcher's responsibilities concerning confidentiality at each stage of the study. -Participant names and identifying features of any affiliated groups will be omitted from the research. -Data collected from the study will be kept in a password protected file. Any physical copies of data will be kept securely in the EPS office. Information will be disposed of 3-5 years after completion.
Deception	-The study will not employ any deception or covert data collection.

5.9.1 Informed Consent and Right to Withdraw

Informed consent is a key feature of ethical research, requiring participants to understand the implications of participation prior to agreeing to the research process (BPS, 2018). Participants were first provided with an information sheet (Appendix D) outlining the study's aims, procedures, confidentiality, and consent process. Those wishing to proceed were provided with a consent form (Appendix N) to complete and return prior to the focus groups. Participants confirmed their understanding of consent procedures at the start of each session and were invited to ask questions at

any stage. They were reminded of their right to withdraw up until the focus group was conducted. Due to the nature of the focus group, participants were informed that their data could not be removed from the transcript post-transcription, as the dataset could no longer be treated as a whole. Participants were instead offered the option to request that their contributions not be quoted in the final report.

5.9.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Given the group setting, additional care was taken to emphasise the importance of confidentiality between participants. Participants were reminded to respect others' privacy and not share personal details outside the focus group. The limits of confidentiality in cases of safeguarding concern were also discussed. Names and identifying features related to individuals, groups, or locations were anonymised or omitted during transcription. All data has been handled in line with the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust's Data Protection and Handling Policies. Information is securely stored in Microsoft OneDrive on a password-protected device, and audio recordings were deleted after transcription. Data will be deleted after 10 years per GDPR guidelines. Participants were informed that the findings may be disseminated or published at a future date.

Research Themes

This chapter presents the themes generated through RTA, offering a story of how community activists make sense of, deconstruct, and reconstruct school exclusion. Five overarching themes highlight different dimensions of school exclusion as a systemic, structural, and socially embedded process. The themes represent how exclusion is enabled, sustained, and resisted.

- The Control Panel- The Myths that Justify Exclusion.

- The Factory Blueprint- Historical and Structural Foundations of Exclusion.

- The Machinery- How Exclusion is Operationalised.

- Short-Circuiting the Machine- Resisting and Challenging Exclusionary Logics.

- Flourishing Beyond the Machine- Education as Growth, Healing, and Radical Belonging.

The process of reaching these themes reflected the complexity and interconnected nature of exclusion, at times disorienting, at others frustrating. Moving through the process, I visualised exclusion as a vast, intricate, and meticulously designed machine. Cogs and gears working in synchrony to sort, categorise, and remove. The metaphor of the machine became the foundation of the thematic structure, each theme representing a different aspect of the system. Something about the coldness of the machine, its harshness, and its indifference felt central to how exclusion operates. Nevertheless, woven throughout the participants' narratives was a counterforce, warmth, resistance, and refusal. At these moments, the machinery began to stutter, and human relationships and alternative ways of being came to light.

Figure 5. *Thematic map*
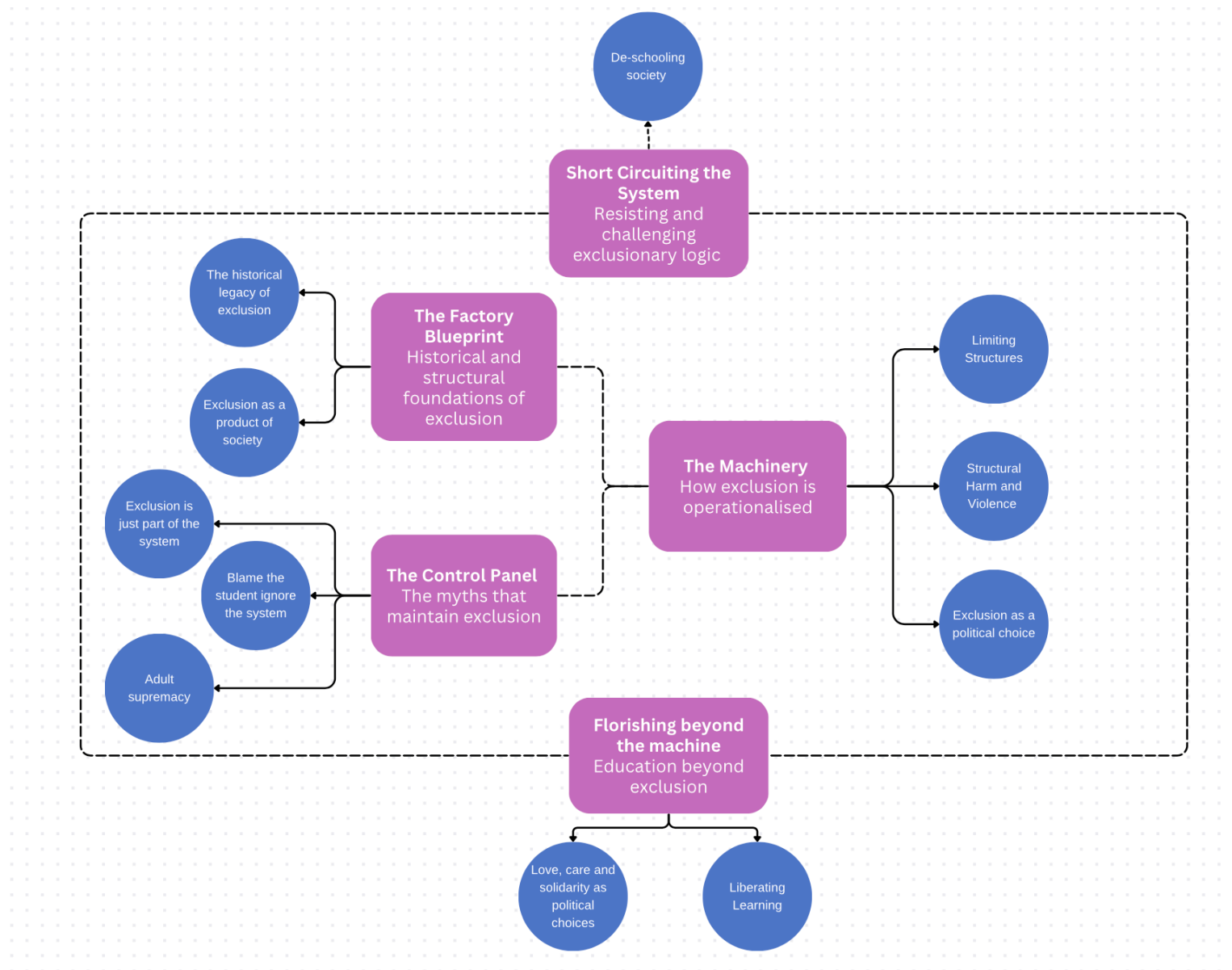
6.1 Overarching Theme 1: The Control Room- The Myths that Justify Exclusion

This theme explores how exclusion is legitimised as a fair, natural, and necessary feature of schooling. Participants discussed how dominant social narratives obscure the structural roots of exclusion, placing responsibility on individuals.

Figure 6. *Overarching theme 1 thematic map.*
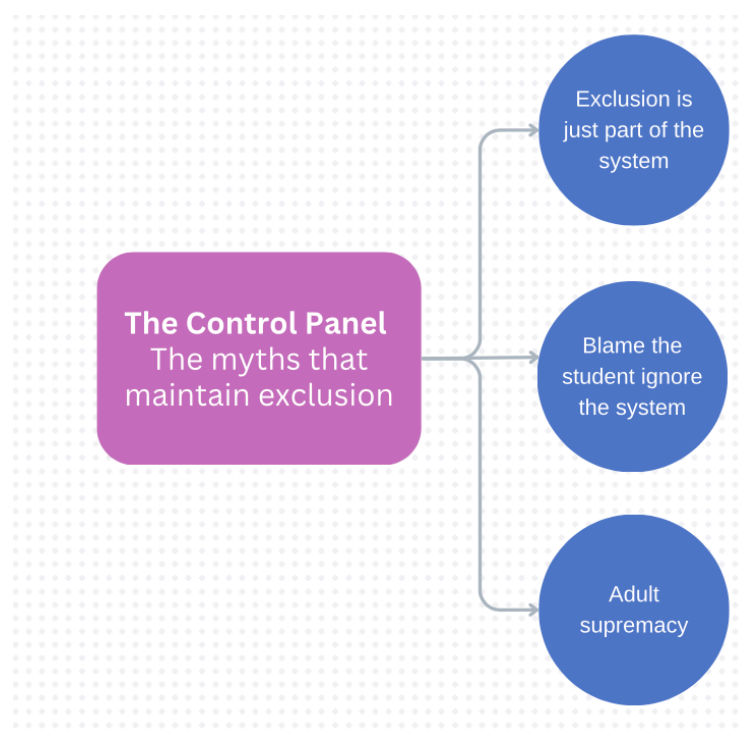
6.1.1 Exclusion is Just Part of The System

Exclusion was understood by participants as naturalised through hegemonic discourses that frame it as inevitable or even beneficial. Participants described how policies, ideological conditioning, and entrenched narratives obscured the structural nature of exclusion, framing it as a necessary consequence of schooling.

"Exclusion and marginalisation are just dogmatically part of the way things operate, you think about where that comes from and how deeply embedded it is" (Participant 1, FG 1).

Reflective of the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), whereby dominant groups maintain power, not through coercion, but through the normalisation of their worldview. Exclusion becomes a procedural norm carried out through "*bureaucracies and external structures*" (Participant 1, FG 2) embedded in schools and wider society (Felluga, 2015) and internalised through "*the deep conditioning of teachers*" (Participant 1, FG 1), policy makers and even parents themselves.

Participant 4 highlighted the extent to which parents "*are so invested in the system they put their children into"* that it *"prevents people from thinking about school and education differently*" (FG, 2). This could be seen to be an enactment of false consciousness in which repeated exposure to dominant structures and the ways in which material, ideological, and institutional processes naturalise their function and prevent people from recognising inequality within them (Delgado, 2001). Participants also alluded to the role of discourse in reinforcing dominant narratives. Exclusion is rebranded in euphemistic terms, sometimes presented as forms of care. "*We're excluding them to meet their needs… which is quite interesting Orwellian twisted language, isn't it?"* (Participant 1, FG1) and *"We can get rid of them because they just don't fit here" (*Participant 4, FG1). These reframes distance exclusion from its material and emotional consequences, deflecting responsibility from institutions and onto the individual.

Language does not simply reflect reality, but constructs it (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Participants described how these narratives come from *"people who've got powerful voices in education"* (Participant 4, FG1) who utilise institutional power to rationalise exclusion and silence critique. Technocratic logic renders exclusion as a managerial decision, rather than a moral or relational one. In some cases, schools were described as encouraged to "*remove them* (children) *without thinking about the consequences"* (Participant 1, FG 1)*,* depersonalising the process and stripping it of its ethical weight.

While hegemonic narratives justify exclusion at a structural level, participants also described the psychological mechanisms that allow individuals to sustain their faith in the system. These were referred to as *"*c*omfort fantasies… the sort of cognitive dissonance around harm*" (*Participant 4, FG1*).* These comfort fantasies help resolve the emotional dissonance between believing in education as a site of care and recognising it as a system that causes harm. Participants observed that these fantasies often appear well-intentioned, such as exclusion being in the "*best interests of the child"* (Participant 4, FG1). In some cases, they preserve a sense of professional identity, in which teachers *"have to identify with the system itself to get through the day, otherwise they're essentially going to feel like they are harming children"* (Participant 1, FG 1).

These comfort fantasies were described as allowing individuals to preserve a moral sense of self while participating in exclusionary systems, making "*teachers feel better, make schools feel better, without addressing or acknowledging any of the systemic inequality going on*" (Participant 4, FG 1). These narratives could be

interpreted as extending beyond conscious awareness to structuring psychic

mechanisms which protect educators from uncomfortable truths (Bott Spillius, 2001).

Alongside these deeper defences, participants also named cognitive dissonance

(Festinger, 1957) to describe how people resolve tensions between their values and

their actions:

"*There has to be some kind of cognitive dissonance for there to be some sort*

of self-preservation, because if you realise the harms you're inflicting upon your

children or other people's children, that could be hard to handle on an emotional

level" (Participant 4, FG 2).

Here, the dissonance between valuing fairness and witnessing harm is resolved not

by changing behaviour, but through reframing the harm as necessary. As one

participant put it, the adaptive behaviours and narratives enacted through cycles of

dissonance make it "*really difficult to change the education system. Because to*

change it you have to admit there's a real fundamental issue and you've also kind of

fed into that too" (Participant 2, FG 2)

These accounts suggest that exclusion is sustained not only by policy and power,

but also feeds into the emotional investments people make in the institution of

school. As Berlant (2011) argues in her concept of cruel optimism, people often cling

to the systems that promise safety or success, even when they actively cause harm.

Education, framed as a route to protection, legitimacy, or social mobility, becomes

difficult to criticise precisely because people are so invested in its promises. Joining

this together, participants highlight how exclusion may not only be supported by

political and structural change, but also a psychic disinvestment from the comfort fantasies that make exclusion feel tolerable.

6.1.2 Blame the Student, Ignore the System

A recurring narrative was the extent to which exclusion is individualised. Rather than addressing systemic contributors to distress or harm, schools and society often locate the problem within the child. Participants described how exclusion is legitimised through personal narratives of blame, deficit, and meritocracy.

"*It seems like the incredibly dominant paradigm in English schooling is. If a student does something wrong, they're solely responsible for that and they need to be corrected, they need to be adjusted*" (Participant 2, FG1).

Reflective of neoliberal ideas of individual responsibilisation (Rose, 1996), whereby "*there's a massive over focus on problematic individuals versus institutional systemic policy change*" (Participant 2, FG1), and social problems are reduced to personal failings. Within this logic, children become the focus of scrutiny, while structural inequalities, such as poverty, racism, and under-resourcing, are ignored. Schools, in turn, respond with behavioural correction rather than systemic support.

Participants described a moral dichotomisation (Forsberg et al., 2019), where exclusionary practices rely on simplistic binaries between good and bad students, which one participant referred to as "*victim-perpetrator binaries*" (Participant 2, FG 1). Collapsing complex social realities into moral categories, which were described to

be influenced by "*class and race all over again*" (Participant 4, FG1) and could be seen as reflecting and reinforcing assumptions rooted in structures of normative whiteness or unruliness (Rizvi, 2024).

Narratives rooted in meritocracy were also criticised, which refers to the belief that success is earned through effort and talent and that schools provide equal opportunity (Reay, 2017). Participants argued that this belief legitimises the exclusion of students who do not meet the normative standards of success, not as unsupported, but as undeserving.

"we're kind of disciplining in order to promote a certain version of individual social mobility" (Participant 2, FG2).

This meritocratic framing extends to behaviour, appearance, and even ways of speaking. Cultural and behavioural conformity was described as policed by teachers under the guise of future employability.

"*If this person doesn't have locs or doesn't have afro hair, they are more likely to be able to ascend in the world of business or to achieve in the world. If they if they don't say words associated with err the Caribbean culture, they're more likely to succeed in an interview. They're more likely to go on and get a job*" (Participant 3, FG 1).

This positions racialised young people as in need of correction to fit market-driven ideals. Teachers were seen to internalise these ideals in which they "*see themselves as having the best interests of young people in mind*" (Participant 3, FG1).

Participants also problematised the way safeguarding is used to justify exclusion. *"I think it's very much seen as a we have to exclude to keep children safe"* (Participant 4, FG2). Though violence is often invoked to rationalise requiring exclusion, participant 3 identified that *"most school exclusions are not in response to violence but in response to persistent disruptive behaviour"* (FG1). Challenging framings of exclusion as protection, suggesting it instead reflects moral judgements about risk. This was extended by participant 4, who suggested that "*safeguarding itself is a form of violence*" (FG1) in which certain children are excluded from safeguarding processes as influenced by assumptions related to "*class and race*" (Participant 4, FG 2).

Wider reflections around how schools understand harm and distress were prompted, suggesting a need to understand behaviour as contextually produced, and to re-situate individual problems within wider ecological and socio-political systems (Kagan, 2011).

"It seems to be to me anyway very much a symptom of much deeper problems that we've already described, but it's very rarely viewed that way in schools and in society generally" (Participant 1, FG1).

Participants described how the *"austerity decimation"* (Participant 2, FG1) of support services has eroded the systems intended to prevent harm, leaving schools to operate as reactive institutions without the infrastructure to intervene meaningfully in student distress. A shift which reflects the broader depoliticisation of distress (Fisher, 2011; Smith, 2022), in which suffering is stripped of its social context and instead *"viewed as… a very individualised family and community-based issue rather than digging deeper and figuring out or what are the structural causes"* (Participant 1, FG 1).

The Scottish context was offered in contrast "*there's been a real significant shift around violence reduction… they've started to view violence as a health issue not a crime*" (Participant 1, FG 1). Distress is understood not as dysfunction, but as a consequence of unmet structural needs, and wellbeing is framed in terms of intersecting social determinants such as housing, income, safety, and belonging (Popay, 2010).

A lens which could recast exclusion not as a response to deviance, but as a failure of systemic care. Participants emphasised that what is often labelled as misbehaviour or disruption may in fact reflect unmet structural need rather than individual pathology. Calling for a shift in practice and mindset, where teachers, schools and professionals are supported to think about what they "*might need to do or could change*" (Participant 2*,* FG1), indicating a shift to thinking systemically. Ecological framings were offered when considering what meaningful transformation might require. A multi-layered model, which targets "*societal factors, services, the education system, and school-based factors", was* suggested to consider "*what*

would need to change on each of these levels in order to make exclusions

essentially obsolete" (Participant 2, FG 1). Aligning with ecological systems theory

(Bronfenbrenner, 1976), which views individual development as shaped by

interdependent systems, from community contexts to national policy.

As community supports and services become fragmented and underfunded, schools

increasingly operate in isolation, without the relational and structural conditions that

support inclusion.

"There was better integration between grassroots, local community

organisations and schools, before austerity decimated those services. Schools and

*communities felt more interwoven" (*Participant 2, FG1).

This erosion of collective structures, participants argued, mirrors a broader shift in

public policy, from collectivism to responsibilisation (Trnka & Trundle, 2014).

Reversing this trend, they suggested, requires more than technical reform and a re-

politicisation of education that foregrounds structural care and treats distress as a

systemic signal, not an individual failure.

6.1.3 Adult Supremacy

This theme captures how children are often positioned by schools and society as

less capable and rational than adults, making exclusion more permissible and less

likely to be questioned. It considers power imbalances rooted in age, where adults

are afforded authority and epistemic privilege.

"Thinking about what [participant 1 name] was saying about dehumanisation… I've become really interested in the concept of childism, so discrimination against children, and I think that has a significant part to play in the sort of the justification for why you can exclude children" (Participant 4, FG 1).

Childism refers to systematic prejudice and discrimination against children, akin to other forms of oppression such as racism and sexism (Young-Bruehl, 2012). It assumes that adults are inherently more competent and deserving of control. Participants described how childist assumptions manifest in disciplinary processes. Participant 4 noted *"When I've spoken to teachers about exclusion…someone said to me…It instils a respect for authority erm by having the fact that you could be excluded means you have to respect the teacher"* (FG1). Here, punishment is not framed as educative, but as disciplinary enforcement, a means of asserting adult control.

Although statutory guidance (DfE, 2022) emphasises the importance of hearing children's voices in exclusion decisions, participants described how, in some cases, children are *"kicked out of school and removed from the community without their consent"* (Participant 1, FG1). Reinforcing a dynamic in which exclusion is done to rather than with young people. An adult-centric process in which the needs, rights or voices of the child are marginalised or erased.

Participants proposed that childism does not operate in isolation. *"The children that are most likely to get excluded they're children who are racialised, they're children*

who are disabled, they're children who've been their social care system, children that live off of free school meals." (Participant 4, FG1). Highlighting how age-based discrimination intersects with other forms of structural oppression. Reflective of intersectional critiques of exclusion (Erevlles, 2014), which argue exclusion is shaped less by individual behaviour and more by social positioning, with different groups of children experiencing exclusion in qualitatively different ways.

Participants reflected on the "*incredibly hierarchical relationships between adults and young people*" (Participant 1, FG2) and explored the slippage between teacher roles, from "*purveyors of knowledge*" to "*moral gatekeepers*" (Participant 1, FG1).

"*Kids help teachers to feel in control or to feel like that their purveyors of knowledge. But then you get the kids who are ambivalent to that, the young people who push back against that, either because they don't want it or they can't cope with it. And then this sort of sleight of hand seems to happen. That's not conscious, where teachers then slip into this other role from being a purveyor of knowledge to a moral guardian*" (Participant 1, FG 1).

The "*purveyor of knowledge*" role mirrors the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), in which students are positioned as passive recipients. When this role is disrupted through distress or resistance, teachers may shift to more punitive models of control, reinstating adult supremacy under the guise of classroom management.

The naturalisation of this hierarchy is challenged as a relatively recent social construction. "*The hard boundary between the two, haven't we at the moment.*

Which is not how human beings have interacted up until very recently" (Participant 1, FG 2). This is aligned with critiques that argue that Western education systems have manufactured adult-child binaries to serve colonial and capitalist logics, disciplining the young in service of the state (Viruru, 2005).

While adultist structures dominate mainstream schooling, participants discussed alternative models which challenge this hierarchy. Alternative spaces that centre consent and relationality offer glimpses of different relationships within education. This is explored further in the theme Liberating Learning.

6.2 Overarching Theme 2: The Factory Blueprint- Historical and Systemic Foundations of Exclusion

This theme examines how exclusion is structurally embedded in the historical, economic, and political architecture of schooling. It focuses on how historic and social forces have shaped schools as institutions which sort, rank, and dispose, and how these logics continue to govern who is permitted to belong.

Figure 7. *Overarching theme 2 thematic map.*
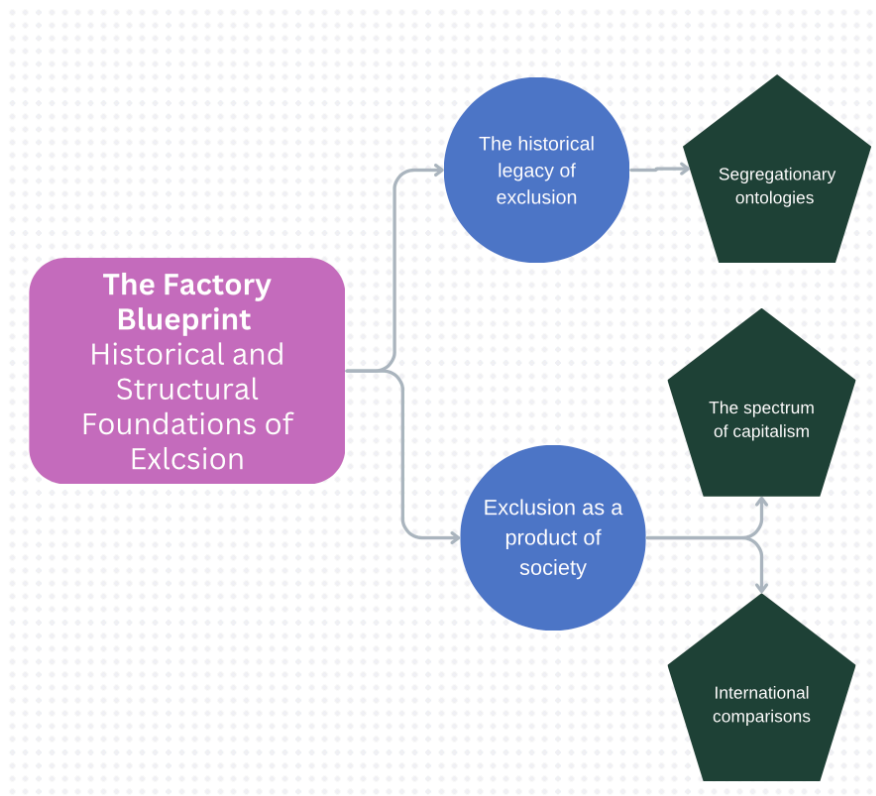
6.2.1 The Historical Legacy of Exclusion

"Those historical roots, those kind of deeply embedded functions of education for the state need to be altered and addressed…you really have to get to the root and address all those historical factors." (Participant 2, FG1).

Participants highlighted how exclusion is entangled with histories of racist and ableist oppression, which continue to shape education structures, purposes, and disciplinary practices today. Schooling was not positioned as a neutral or benevolent project, but as a sorting machine, a site of industrial training, and an extension of state discipline. Contemporary education policies were described as rooted in colonial governance, eugenicist narratives, and punitive hierarchies.

"It's only really since the 1950s that there's even been any sense of agreement, politically, that education for all is a good thing. Before that, it was completely segregated. You wouldn't be educated past 11 pre-World War II. If you're poor, you're in a factory or serving industrial purposes." (Participant 1, FG2).

This historical lens positions exclusion not as a deviation from an inclusive norm but as a continuation of schooling's foundational role in reproducing social hierarchy. Functioning to differentiate and stratify those deemed 'worthy' of academic development from those who are assigned to lower-tier and economic and social roles.

Participants also positioned exclusion as a classed practice that predates neoliberalism, rooted in Britain's long-standing class hierarchy. One participant reflected, "*there's such a deeply entrenched notion that people come from these different classes and they're there and they're fundamentally different*" (Participant 2, FG1). Highlighting how exclusion disproportionately affects working-class and racialised children, a critique that aligns with theories of class reproduction (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Which argues that schools serve to subtly reproduce dominant class relations and place students into pre-existing social and economic positions.

6.2.1.1 Segregationary Ontologies: Colonialism, Carceral Logics, and Eugenics

Participants described the English education system as being shaped by *"segregationary ontologies"* (Participant 1, FG2), the idea that schooling operates through foundational logics of separation, hierarchy, and control. These logics,

participants argued, are rooted in colonial, carceral, and eugenicist worldviews that sort and rank, determining who is valued, who must be corrected, and who should be cast out.

"When schooling became mandatory in like the late 19th century, it was largely about the social control and managing what was perceived to be a potentially dangerous class of people, especially post the broadening that the franchise." (Participant 2, FG1).

This view echoes the colonial function of education as a tool of assimilation and discipline, where knowledge is constructed through Eurocentric frames and discipline operates as a civilising force (Fanon, 1961). Parallels were drawn between these histories and contemporary exclusions, suggesting that racialised working-class children continue to be marked as other and subject to removal. Participants described this as a neo-colonial logic operating under new guises:

"They've been fairly explicitly neo-colonial in how they approach things like the the narrative is essentially [place name] is a slum, and these kids are slum dwellers, and we need to civilise them." (Participant 2, FG1).

"Because of this sort of neo-colonial approach that we have… whereby what we're really doing is segregating off people we don't like, people we think are problematic."(Participant 1, FG1).

Participants observed how schools increasingly mirror the criminal justice system, as spaces of surveillance, regulation, and correction. Even when driven by good intentions, one participant noted, "*the instinct is to think this behaviour needs correcting… this individual needs correcting or removing*" (Participant 2, FG 2). This dynamic was seen as reflecting a wider punitive environment.

"*That's the same in an incredibly punitive hostile environment policies. Incredibly punitive criminal justice system. We've got massive over-imprisonment compared to most other countries, and I think that's culturally ingrained*" (Participant 2, FG1).

Participants identified how punitive surveillance extends across institutions, including schools, housing, and welfare services. Noting how everyday school practices, like behaviour tracking, or even support-based meetings, can "*lead to forms of surveillance and er discipline and tracking students*" (Participant 3, FG 2). Perhaps reflective of the concept of the carceral continuum (Moran et al., 2017), which highlights how social relational structures can uphold containment and control. Participants also highlighted how this surveillance extends the regulation of dress, language, and expression.

"*The policing of hair, the policing of language leads to school exclusions… we're a long way away from school… questioning the logics that underpin society. That encourages us to see certain hairstyles that are racialised as problematic in certain ways of speaking that are racialised as problematic*" (Participant 3, FG1)

Mirroring colonial strategies of control, where indigenous languages and cultural expressions were criminalised to enforce white, Eurocentric norms. In today's schooling context, such practices require racialised students to perform Whiteness as a condition of inclusion.

Participants pointed to how these carceral logics are not only structural but internalised. Drawing on abolitionist thought, one participant described the need to "*change the police officer in ourselves*" (Participant 3, FG2), a call to interrogate the internalisation of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991). Which positions exclusion as a habit of mind cultivated by a punitive culture that sees control as care. Suggesting a need to unlearn the conditioned reflex to punish, correct, and remove those who do not conform.

Eugenics were also mentioned as a structuring force which influenced who and what is valued, and how these ideologies still manifest in education today. Namely echoed in setting and streaming practices, akin to segregation by intellect.

"*England is different there is a longstanding history of eugenics, and that particular febrile ideology, you know, it started in UCL in the 1860s, up in the 1940s, we had a tripartite school system that essentially championed a certain type of mind. The idea that there are different types of mind, and even when the comprehensive revolution happened, that three types of human went in via setting and streaming, didn't it?*" (Participant 1, FG1).

6.2.2 Exclusion as a Product of Society

Participants emphasised that school exclusion is not an isolated feature of education policy, but a reflection of deeper societal forces. It was described as a product of the broader social, economic, and political landscape. A symptom of inequality rather than a cause. Several participants reflected on the difficulty of disentangling exclusion from these intersecting forces, questioning the parameters of analysis, acknowledging the complexity of tackling exclusion without addressing the conditions that give rise to it.

"*It's just pulling the threads ((laughs)). Where do you stop? It's just such a complex issue*" (Participant 4, FG1)

This systems-level view resonates within abolitionist frameworks, which argue that exclusionary practices are symptoms of broader logics. Participants noted that banning formal exclusion without challenging the wider ideological terrain would likely lead to the emergence of other exclusionary mechanisms that are less regulated but equally harmful.

"*Its deeply entrenched in England and I think would still be a problem even if we found a way to have no exclusions. I think that would manifest it, that that would manifest itself in other ways and would require other forms of change beyond just getting rid of exclusions*" (Participant 2, FG1).

Participants described how oppressive structures are *"baked into all our institutions"* (Participant 1, FG 1), including schools, the legal system and social welfare policies. Calling for a deeper interrogation of the foundational logics underpinning these systems, those which naturalise inequality and condition us to accept harm as inevitable.

"All together, we must question the logics that underpin society". (Participant 3, FG1).

"I think for me society would have to be radically transformed… we've all grown up and been conditioned in this society where we take harm and inequality for granted to a certain extent". (Participant 3, FG1).

Suggesting that exclusionary logic resides not just in institutional practices but also in the cultural and psychological frameworks that make them seem necessary or normal.

6.2.2.1 International Comparisons

Participants drew comparisons with international contexts where exclusions are significantly reduced or do not occur at all. Participants highlighted how *"England is uniquely weird in European terms"* (Participant 1, FG1), referring to its distinctively punitive approach. Participants referenced countries such as Portugal, Estonia, Scotland, and Finland, highlighting key cultural differences in how exclusion is

understood and addressed. They described how, in some contexts, exclusion is not just rare but socially and morally unfathomable.

"*To get to a place at which it would seem odd to exclude a kid and we'd get more like into the other European examples where just the idea of expelling a student from school was kind of baffling*" (Participant 2, FG1).

These discussions spoke to the social and ideological dimensions of exclusion. Connecting England's reliance on exclusion as culturally constructed, shaped by a history of colonialism, class stratification and neoliberalism. Some European nations were seen to have invested more in inclusion, solidarity, and collective wellbeing.

"*Culturally speaking they* (Finland) *don't have this history of colonialism*" (Participant 1, FG2).

Participants linked these differences to revolutionary histories, suggesting political struggle had fostered stronger commitments to solidarity and social cohesion.

"*So if you look at how things developed in Portugal in the 1970s on the back of a very lengthy dictatorship.*" (Participant X, FG)

Capitalism emerged as a central analytic point. While many of these countries operate within capitalist economies, participants identified key differences between hyper-neoliberal capitalism (as seen in England) and social democratic capitalism (as seen in Northern Europe). These models differ in the extent to which they embed

social protections and prioritise welfare.

"*I think most of the countries we're thinking about are perhaps not quite as far along in a neoliberal capitalism as England, but certainly they are capitalist countries*" (Participant 3, FG1).

"*you've got capitalist nations, which it's all intents and purposes, are trading in the same way we do. And in some ways are similar economic systems. But they're founded in a very different cultural milieu*" (Participant 1, FG1).

Despite sharing economic foundations, key ideological differences shape how schooling is structured and how young people are treated. Unsettling the assumption that punitive exclusionary schooling is natural or inevitable, instead framing it as a policy choice reflective of a national social contract.

6.1.1.2 The Spectrum of Capitalism

Participants explored the centrality of capitalism in shaping the purpose and practices of education in England, arguing that schools operate as extensions of wider economic institutions. Education, they suggested, is designed to prepare individuals for commodification in the labour market.

"*The fundamental feature of capitalism is that we don't have access to means of subsistence…everyone is dependent upon commodifying themselves within a job*

market and the whole education system is kind of based upon that notion"
*(*Participant 2, FG2).

This critique prompted questions about the assumed purpose of schooling itself:
"*why do we have exams? Why do we have schools set up in the way they are?"*
(Participant 3, FG 2). Rather than being framed around learning or personal
development, participants argued that education is oriented towards producing
compliant, economically productive citizens.

"Education is about the efficient allocation of human resources into the
economy… reproducing class inequalities, racial inequalities and so on". (Participant
2, FG1).

They described how schools mirror the competitive structures of capitalism, fostering
a sense of "*urgency*" and precarity that aligns with the demands of the economy.

"*Capitalism produces the sense of competition which produces this sense of*
urgency in education… it is that sense of urgency that I think makes exclusions, so
seductive and appealing to teachers and schools" (Participant 3, FG2).

Participants framed school exclusion as a broader system of economic disposability,
operating to manage surplus populations who do not fit easily within the demands of
a competitive system. A framing which, again, describes how capitalism relies on
stratification to justify economic exclusion and exploitation.

"Capitalism needs losers… there has to be people on the losing end of how things are organised, and one of the ways people lose is through exclusion' (Participant 3, FG1).

Attention was drawn to the intersection of race in this organising system, noting that:

"*People are just going to be shifted and punished elsewhere in the system, or even a different set of people are going to be punished and excluded… kept out of the fruits of capitalism*" (Participant 4, FG 1)

A reflection which resonates with aspects of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983), which posits that capitalism has always been racialised, dependent on exploitation, colonial conquest, and the construction of disposability.

Participants reflected on how different forms of capitalism shape educational outcomes in a distinct way. Hyper-neoliberal models, such as those found in England, were described as coupling schooling to labour market demands, credentials, and high-stakes competition. Social democratic systems, in contrast, embed education within broader social protections, offering alternative pathways to economic participation.

"*In Finland, vocational education is not seen as a lesser. It's a different framework- one where you're not a dullard if you take the vocational track, it's totally legitimate and part of the culture*" (Participant 1, FG2).

Vocational pathways were cited as an example of this difference, describing how it is not stigmatised, but integrated as a legitimate and respected route, which reduces the pressure to conform to narrow ideals of academic success. Yet, participants were cautious not to romanticise these alternatives, highlighting how *"the academic track is still the valorised one, still the the better one."* (Participant 1, FG2).

An ideological tension emerged around the assumptions that underpin education. Some participants voiced hopes for a more ethical or humane form of capitalism in which education could serve both social and economic functions without producing harm. Whereas participant 3 questioned whether education should be tied to work at all.

"I guess what strikes me as still being there though is erm preparing people for work and I think that's we'd all agree that there are questions there about whether, how central that should be to the purpose of education." (FG2).

Even participants who are critical of exclusion appeared to implicitly accept education's role in sustaining the economy. This challenge to the normalisation of education-as-labour-production was framed not just as a political concern, but a moral one. This raises the question of whether education can be just while still serving a system that relies on inequality to function.

"If you only targeted school exclusions, capitalism would reformulate and find other ways to make people lose. People would lose in other ways…whether that's

increased policing outside of school, increased controls around housing

arrangements, or other exclusionary mechanisms." (Participant 3, FG1).

6.3 Overarching Theme 3: The Machinery- How Exclusion is Operationalised

This theme moves beyond ideological justifications for exclusion toward examining how it is materially produced and operationalised through policy, funding structures, and school-level processes. Participants described how school exclusion is enabled through structural mechanisms, including accountability pressures and restrictive curriculum models, which prime and facilitate the conditions for exclusion, prioritising efficiency, and competition.

Figure 8. *Overarching theme 3 thematic map.*
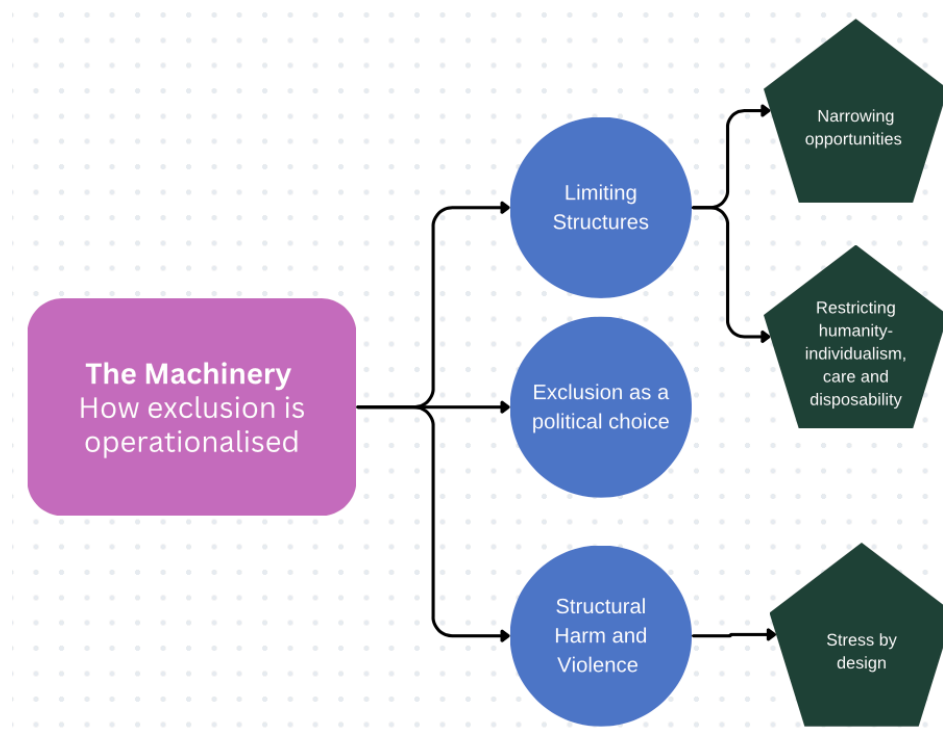
5.3.1 Exclusion as a Political Choice

Exclusion was framed as a structurally incentivised outcome, embedded within a competitive education system governed by market logics of performance, efficiency, and risk management. Within this system, schools are rewarded not for inclusion but for outcomes, measured through narrow metrics and reputational standing.

"If a school wants to compete with another school, the best way to do that, particularly when schools sometimes become academies and get taken over by people with sharp elbows, is you just get kids who are not going to provide those grades getting removed." (Participant 1, FG1).

Exclusion was understood as a strategic response to the pressures of the performativity agenda (Ball, 2003), in which league tables, inspection frameworks, and accountability mechanisms shape institutional behaviour. Policy technologies (Ball, 1993) incentivise the removal of students deemed unlikely to contribute to performance outcomes. Within this agenda, exclusion becomes an expedient tool. *"It's that sense of urgency that makes exclusion so seductive, if we get rid of that child, we can focus on our league table results"* (Participant 3, FG2). Rather than fostering collaboration, participants highlighted how the quasi-market system encourages schools to act in self-interested ways. One participant likened the expectation of cooperation in a competitive environment to "*asking Man United and Man City to cooperate to win the Premier League. It's absolutely bonkers.*" (Participant 1, FG1).

This was described as intensified through processes of academisation, with MATs operating like corporate entities. Participants referred to internal documents from academy chains in which low-performing students were labelled as *"anchor students"* (Participant 1, FG1)*,* a term that foregrounds exclusion as a strategy of institutional self-preservation. Exclusion, whether formal or informal, is used to remove them from performance data.

"What it does is create some really perverse incentives…and the young people at the end of it who are sharply removed or marginalised into isolation rooms or unregistered schools are always the same young people" (Participant 1, FG1)*.*

These tensions were seen to reflect deeper ideological incoherence within education governance. Participants pointed to the disjuncture between institutions like the DfE and Ofsted, each with different and often conflicting priorities:

"*Ofsted is a sort of bizarre institution that is demanding a broad and balanced curriculum, but then you've got the DfE here only demanding results, which is again an extremely complicated and pretty ludicrous paradox because you can't have a broad and balanced curriculum whilst also narrowing the curriculum to ensure test results*" (Participant 1, FG1).

While schools are judged on attainment, participants argued that while schools are held to performance targets*,* there is no central body who ensures that education is

an equitable institution. Leaving a vacuum where schools are left to navigate contradictory demands and exclusion becomes both *normalised* and invisible.

"*It's not on teacher training. It's not in the in the philosophical documents. It isn't like in the behaviour policies and it's not sort of held anywhere by any of the institutional bodies like Ofsted.*" (Participant 1, FG1).

Participants critiqued how inclusion rhetoric coexists with structurally embedded exclusionary logics. This contradiction reflects a deeper ideological tension between espoused commitments to "*equality and education for all*" and policy demands of "*standards, excellence, and accountability*" (Participant 1, FG1)

The lack of psychological or educational expertise within central policymaking bodies was highlighted and contrasted with Scotland and Finland, where pedagogical and psychological knowledge plays a more active role in shaping education policy. Arguing that in England, education policy is shaped by political ideology, rather than research or professional knowledge.

"*We don't have people in the DfE, or at the levers of change who are actually experts in things like behaviour*" (Participant 1, FG 1)

In Scotland, education is locally governed, which "*means that the Director of education within a particular city is effectively the head teacher for the whole city*" (Participant 2, FG1). This model was framed as fostering a stronger sense of

collective responsibility for students, contrasting with England's fragmented and highly centralised system.

Participants linked England's policy context to the *"Global Education Reform Movement" (*Participant 1, FG1) (Sahlberg, 2016), which has driven standardisation, privatisation and marketisation in global education policy. England is described as a particularly intensified model where top-down performance targets, institutional fragmentation, and the erasure of collective responsibility have normalised exclusion as an operational tool.

6.3.2 Limiting Structures

Participants described how policy, ideology, and structural constraints converge to narrow the scope of what education is and could be. Limiting structures were seen to restrict opportunities through a narrowing of curriculum, educational pathways, and definitions of success. The system was also proposed to restricting humanity by undermining care, relationality, and belonging. This subtheme explores ways in which structural barriers constrain care, opportunity, and inclusion.

6.3.2.1 Narrowing Opportunities

Education was framed as becoming increasingly narrow and restrictive, limiting both the curriculum and the range of opportunities available to students. Participants attributed it to the way in which standardisation in a neoliberal context *"constructs every human being in the same subject of the same curriculum, same success criteria, same pace of lessons"* (Participant 1, FG1), which in turn erases diversity

and '*dehumanises and marginalises*' (Participant 1, FG1) those who fall outside of those normative ideals.

This homogenising approach to education was closely linked to the transformation of schooling into a credentialing process. "*You're not really there to learn, are you? You're there for credentials*" (Participant 1, FG 2). Rather than nurturing curiosity or fostering critical thought, education was described as valuing compliance over exploration. Learning was described as contingent on measurable outcomes, in which differences become an obstacle rather than a resource.

The illusion of educational choice was also interrogated as limiting opportunities for genuine participation and equality.

> "*A principle that's meant to be in education, but isn't, is a variety of different forms of provision and genuine parental choice or choice for young people*" (Participant 2, FG2).

While education policy frames itself as offering diverse pathways of educational provision, these options were largely seen as being dictated by social status (e.g private or grammar schools) and exclusionary structures (APs and PRUs), rather than genuine or authentic plurality. Participants suggested that APs are a form of "*segregation rather than inclusion*" (Participant 1, FG2), whereby alternative modes of education are usually only made available after exclusion or removal, or as a response to distress, rather than serving as a proactive and equally valued pathway.

"There are some good APs, but I guess the fact of the matter is that you shouldn't have to have segregated schooling or exclusion to ensure that a child should get an education. But so I think maybe the fact that AP exists as well allows that sort of illusion of it's OK, we can get rid of some children because they just don't fit here." (Participant 4, FG1).

The existence of APs becomes a moral alibi, a way for schools to justify removal through a frame of benevolence, while deflecting scrutiny from the mainstream system, allowing its failures to go unchallenged. Rather than confronting institutional inequality, exclusion is reframed as a necessary and benevolent act, obscuring the system's inability, or refusal, to accommodate diverse needs.

Participants unanimously agreed on the need for more "*authentic plurality*" (Participant 1, FG2). Not simply more pathways, but structurally equal and culturally valued alternatives. Drawing contrasts with Finland and Portugal, Participant 1 noted that the "*curriculum is treated as a guide, not a script*" (FG2), enabling more inclusive and relational pedagogies. Others referenced vocational and academic routes in Finland, where options were framed not as a hierarchy but as legitimate choices. Yet, participants cautioned against romanticising educational plurality without confronting the deeper inequalities that govern access and valuation.

"How do you get a plurality of schools without entrenched class inequalities, institutional racism, and different kinds of parents mobilising their resources to access perceived 'better' schools?" (Participant 2, FG2)

Without structural transformation, they argued, diversification risks becoming another mechanism of stratification, offering symbolic variation while preserving systemic exclusion.

6.3.2.2 Restricting humanity- individualism, care, and disposability

Participants described how exclusion is sustained through relational, cultural, and affective dynamics shaped by broader political conditions. Neoliberal logics of individualism, competition, and scarcity were seen to erode collective responsibility, distort notions of care, and frame certain lives as disposable. Individualism, a defining feature of neoliberalism, was said to shape how people relate to one another, driving self-preservation at the expense of solidarity. A scarcity-driven mindset associated with this worldview extended beyond Individual aspirations and into institutional dynamics, including school culture and parental engagement.

"Well, these credentials mean that my child wins and that child loses. And I can make sure my child wins and that child loses, and therefore, you know, I maintain this very problematic and actually not very well attested level of resources and wealth." (Participant 1, FG2)

Education, rather than being experienced as a collective public good, was positioned as a zero-sum game, where one child's success necessitates another's failure.

"*Of course they're going to exclude that one child that the parents are demanding needs to go because they want the good results from the other ten kids that will stay…it's just such deep-rooted…intolerance of people*" (Participant 4, FG4)

Participants connected these relational shifts to a broader cultural context marked by economic insecurity, competition, and the erosion of social bonds. Exclusion was positioned as a socially conditioned response to perceived threats, an expression of a world in which precarity is normalised and relational ties are easily dissolved (Bauman, 2000).

The normalisation of distress was seen to extend beyond the school gates. Participants reflected on how harm, inequality, and visible suffering have become routine features of social life, ceasing to be seen as failures to be addressed, but instead, as inevitable conditions to be tolerated.

"*There's just this palpable sense that certain people are just kind of disposed of and they're visibly in distress or kind of teetering on the brink of crisis. And it's just accepted*" (Participant 2, FG1).

"*We've all grown up and been conditioned in this society where we take harm and inequality for granted to a certain extent. No matter how much we try and push against that, we're all still conditioned by it.*" (FG1, Participant 3)

Within schools, the erasure of care mirrored this broader pattern, replacing relationality and compassion with efficiency and compliance.

"Well, it's it's not a big deal, they don't matter anyway, but the actual act of excluding a child from their peer group, from their school" (Participant 4, FG1).

Exclusion was framed as a symbolic act that reflects societal judgements about human worth. Words such as *"getting rid of"* (Participant 4, FG1) *and* "*dealt with*" (Participant 2, FG1) littered expressions, revealing the dehumanisation of those targeted by the practice. Disposability, as discussed by participants, was not only social but economic, tied to the broader capitalist logics in which productivity, conformity, and potential economic contributions serve as the metrics of human value.

"*It's either succeed in school or you're on some kind of rubbish pile".* (Particiapant 2, FG 2).

This aligns with the concept of necropolitics (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003), which highlights how power operates through the differential valuation of life, determining who is allowed to flourish and who is abandoned. It also reflects disability justice critiques, which outline how state and institutional systems determine who is allowed to live fully, and who is structurally abandoned (Puar, 2017). Within this frame, school exclusion becomes a form of social death, a mechanism by which the economic order renders certain lives as surplus.

"Some people are kind of disposable, going back to the kind of justice point. And if, if you have an economy based on the idea that some people are essentially

kind of detritus, then that can clearly fit into a kind of exclusionary logic." (Participant 2, FG2).

The reproduction of disposability was spoken about in intersectional terms. Participants described how the students most frequently excluded, those racialised, disabled, care-experienced, and working class, were already systemically devalued by society, making their exclusion from education feel not only predictable but legitimised.

"Positioning children specifically as not valuable, and you think about the children that are most likely to get excluded, they're children who are racialised, they're children who are disabled, they're children who've been in the social care system, children that live off of free school meals. We know those are the children that are just devalued for who they are in society anyway" (Participant 4, FG 1).

Exclusion becomes a confirmation of societal beliefs about whose lives are worthy of support and investment. While schools are often rhetorically framed as communities of care, participants problematised the conditional nature of inclusion. Care was extended only to students who conformed to normative expectations. Belonging was not a right, but something to be earned through compliance.

"It's kind of conditional community. So it's like, if you do X, then you're out of our community, you're gone, the community cannot tolerate XYZ" (Participant 2, FG1)

Participants reflected on how discourses of safeguarding were routinely co-opted to justify exclusionary practices, invoked primarily to protect the comfort and entitlement of those deemed more valuable or "*deserving*" (Participant 4, FG2). Participants critically questioned who is considered more "*valuable and in need of keeping safe*" (Participant 4, FG1). Care itself becomes stratified; certain children, often those who are privileged or perceived as academically successful, are positioned as rightful recipients of protection, while others are constructed as threats to be managed or removed.

Inclusion in schools was described as meaning assimilation or integration. Those deemed 'other' were expected to integrate into a normative model of schooling, rather than the system adapting to accommodate their needs. One participant described this as "*awkwardly including those others*" (Participant 2, FG1), drawing attention to the superficiality of inclusion practices. Inclusion was framed as corrective, aimed at integrating those on the margins.

> **"Even the positive language is sometimes about like, well, we've got this like kind of lumpen kind of others over here and we need to think about how to better integrate them, rather than challenge the extent to which inequality has been allowed to get this ridiculous"** (Participant 2, FG2).

One participant compared it to a "*systematic process of othering*" (Participant 1, FG1) in which individuals who deviate from normative ideals related to race, class, disability, or culture are viewed as not belonging within mainstream academic spaces. This critique resonates with inclusive education literature, which argues that

the rhetoric of inclusion frequently masks practices of assimilation, placing expectations on children to 'fit in' without addressing underlying structural inequalities (Graham & Slee, 2008).

A recurring paradox was the gap between symbolic gestures of inclusion and the material realities of exclusion. While schools often adopt the language of equity and belonging, participants observed how these ideals are undermined by practices that repackage exclusion in more palatable forms.

"The idea of inclusion actually being exclusion… we all know that inclusion rooms are actually the exclusion ones. So, my favourite one was when a kid walked past me and I was like 'where are you going?' and then he said I'm going to the inclusion room because I've been excluded ((laughs))" (Participant 1, FG1).

Renaming exclusionary spaces as inclusion zones was described as a symbolic manoeuvre, allowing schools to appear compliant with inclusive policy imperatives while operationalising forms of removal, containment, and control. Similarly, restorative practices were reported to be misappropriated or diluted, co-opted into the punitive logics they were originally designed to disrupt. Participant 2 noted *"restorative practices* (are) *getting bastardised to to a ludicrous extent, where some schools are just renaming their detentions restoratives"* (FG1). These pseudo-inclusionary approaches were not seen as meaningful shifts in ethos but as attempts to reconcile contradictory policy imperatives through attempting to demonstrate inclusive practice while preserving institutional order, performance outcomes, and a particular cultural image.

This tension links to broader cultural investments in normativity. Participants described how difference is not accommodated but managed. Attempts to create inclusive environments are undermined by an underlying intolerance of difference that reflects wider societal anxieties. *"But it's just like the the lack of acceptance of difference. And it goes beyond the school walls"* (Participant 4, FG1).

6.3.3 Structural Harm and Violence

Participants did not frame exclusion as an isolated disciplinary act, but rather as an expression of structural violence, the cumulative effects of policy, ideology, and institutional design, which normalises harm and renders it invisible. Exclusion was thus understood both as a direct action and as symptomatic of broader systems that legitimise inequality.

"Societal factors, so like racism, poverty, inequality, capitalist injustice, housing… all the things outside the school gates that cause structural harms affecting young people." (Participant 2, FG1)

Aligning with an understanding of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), where harm is enacted through systemic neglect and inequity. Participants challenged the idea that violence or distress stems solely from the behaviour of individuals, instead reframing exclusion as a predictable response to socially produced harm. Particular attention was given to the psychological violence of isolation, especially through internal seclusion and exclusion from school communities. These practices, although legitimised through policy, were described as profoundly damaging.

"*There's nothing more violent than putting someone in a room on their own all day. Or kicking them out of school and removing them from the community. It's probably more harmful than physical injury*." (Participant 1, FG1)

Reflective of Williams' (2007) research on ostracism, which identifies social exclusion as deeply damaging to core human needs such as belonging and self-esteem. Despite this, "*There's definitely the idea that exclusion isn't harmful*" (Participant 4, FG 1).

Harm was also discussed in terms of how it is differentially impactful. Gendered and racialised expressions of distress were described to shape outcomes in which girls were seen as more likely to internalise and be medicalised, while boys were more likely to express harm through violence and become criminalised. Both responses were seen to pathologise distress rather than recognise it as structurally produced.

"*Thousands of children are experiencing significant harm at the hands of the school system. If they're girls, they might show up in CAMHS. If they're boys, they might end up involved in violence*." (Participant 1, FG 1)

Perhaps reflecting calls for intersectional understandings of structural violence (Gilligan, 2009), and offering scope for integrating feminist critiques that interrogate how harm is made illegible through dominant framings of vulnerability, dysfunction, or deviance.

The impact of harm was also linked to parental positioning. Although many parents recognised the emotional harm caused by schools, they often felt powerless to intervene, resulting in resigned complicity.

"*I'm sending my kids to suffer, but what else can I do*?" (Participant 2, FG2).

In some cases, this distress manifested as emotionally based school avoidance or coerced attendance. Parents with greater resources were typically more able to opt out, highlighting class-based inequalities in accessing alternative pathways. These dynamics are explored further in the theme Short-Circuiting the System.

Across these reflections, exclusion was framed as part of a broader pedagogy of harm. A system in which mental health deteriorates under the weight of performativity, normalised stress, and punitive norms.

"*We surveyed around 48,000 families… 94% of the parents said that school is either negative or very negative for the mental health of their kids*." (Participant 1, FG2).

Rather than being protective, schools were often described as sites of harm, where exclusion is the most visible expression of deeper systemic failures.

6.3.4 Material Conditions or Values?

This theme explores a central tension in participants' reflections, whether inclusion can be achieved through improving material conditions or whether it requires a deeper, more fundamental reimagining of ideologies. While some argued that ideological transformation must precede material change, others posed a more

pragmatic question as to how much might shift if schools were resourced well enough to create space for reflection, care, and connection.

"*There's a slightly embedded problem in the way that those questions are framed in that there's an assumption that what we need to do is inject more materials and more resources into schools*" (Participant 1, FG2)

Participants pointed to the material scarcity in schools as a barrier to inclusive practice, impacting the extent to which educators can meaningfully connect with and support children. Participants wondered if inclusion might be achieved if "*schools were better resourced, class sizes were smaller, teachers had more headspace and time, had more support from other pastoral colleagues*" (Participant 1, FG1). This pragmatic hope was tempered by a critical awareness that structural inequality is not merely logistical but ideological. Participant 4 recounted a conversation with a teacher who stated it *"was not* (my) *responsibility to teach these* (SEND) *children"* (FG1)*.* They wondered if more training would enable inclusion, drawing attention to how beliefs about who is educable often remain untouched by funding or professional development. Inclusion is not only blocked by logistical constraints but also by enduring beliefs about worthiness, responsibility, and normativity. A tension which echoes critiques of inclusion as a depoliticised project (Slee, 2011), which suggests that inclusion cannot be realised through funding alone, but requires the dismantling of ableist, classist and racist assumptions embedded in the system.

Participant 3 offered a counterview, noting that while material change might not be sufficient, it could still have a meaningful impact. Improved conditions might not

transform ideology, but they could "*pull away a lot of different excuses*" (Participant 3, FG2) to expose and challenge the ideologies otherwise concealed by resource scarcity.

"*If we did all those (.) made those changes to the material conditions of schools…I'd really like to see how far we'd get… I'm not naive enough to think it would get us all the way, but I think it might do some of the work*." (Participant 3, FG2).

There was a tension between acknowledging workload as a barrier and the risk of excusing harmful practice. Participant 3 noted how discussions of teacher stress are sometimes framed as giving an "out" for racism or exclusion but rejected this binary framing. Workload was positioned as part of a structural critique that shifts responsibility from individual failing to the institutional conditions shaping practice.

"*It's a material reality that people work under stressful conditions. Unlikely, err, unable to fulfil their job role in any meaningful sense, and certainly not in any kind of compassionate and caring way.*" (Participant 3, FG1).

6.3.4.1 Stress by Design

Scarcity and pressure were proposed to erode care and constrain reflection, making exclusion more likely. Stress was described not only as an emotional by-product of the system, but as a mechanism which discourages compassionate and relational ways of working.

"The franticness is something that's so visceral in schools, isn't it? Everyone's frantic… from the receptionist right up to the head. It's quite amazing to watch, and disturbing." (Participant 1, FG2)

This "*toxic stress bouncing around schools*" (Participant 2, FG1) was described as a collective condition, emphasising how *"there is a scarcity of headspace and therefore a scarcity of conducive conditions to build meaningful supportive relationships with young people"* (Participant 2, FG1). This scarcity was seen as politically and economically structured. The relentless pace of schools, ever-expanding workload, and constant performance pressures are not only unsustainable but also intentional, designed to limit reflection.

"They don't have the capacity or the time to consider how the systems that they're enacting, what they're doing to the students, is actively causing harm. Because if you took a moment to stop and think… I don't know whether I could live with myself." (Participant 4, FG1)

This points toward a kind of moral dissociation, a defence mechanism required to survive in a system that routinely causes harm. Layton (2009) suggests that neoliberal systems demand people sever from their ethical selves to survive in institutions that reproduce harm. Here, stress is a symptom and shield, blocking reflection and enabling complicity.

Participants described stress as a "*conservative force*" (Participant 2, FG2), which forecloses imaginative thinking and resistance, rendering alternatives to exclusion difficult to conceptualise, let alone enact. "*Everyone is terrified about making ends meet or hitting a particular accountability measure… that sense of urgency*

discourages expansive thought." (Participant 2, FG2). The sense of urgency created by accountability structures was described as "*one of the early things we have to tackle*" (Participant 3, FG2) if change is to occur. Stress functions as a mechanism of control, deterring resistance and isolating practitioners while reducing the time needed for relational practices.

This manufactured urgency reinforces a scarcity mindset, in which students who require more time, care, or support are positioned as threats to efficiency. Exclusion then becomes a way to relieve institutional pressure, streamline classroom management, and protect results. By connecting this scarcity-driven culture to the broader political economy of schooling, this aligns with Slee's (2011) claim that inclusive reform cannot succeed within a system architected for performance, compliance, and exclusion.

6.4 Overarching Theme 4: Short-Circuiting the Machine- Resisting and Challenging Exclusionary Logics.

Figure 9. *Overarching theme 4 thematic map*
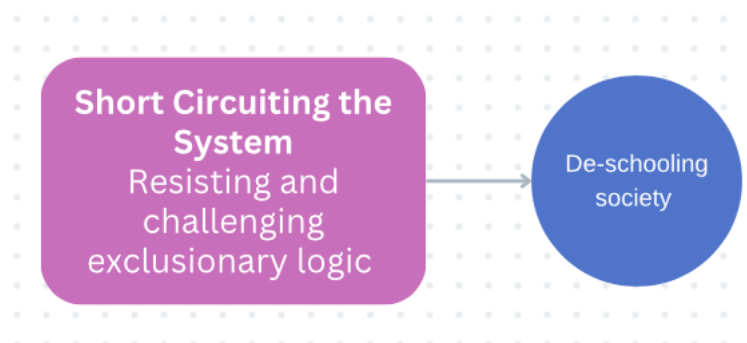
Participants stated a growing recognition, among parents, professionals, and communities, that education is not working as intended. Reflecting on hegemonic narratives discussed earlier, they described a slow unravelling, catalysed by accumulated contradictions and crises, that have made it increasingly difficult to maintain the illusion that the system is fair or functional.

"*It does feel like it's more mainstream the recognition that, like things aren't really working and on a grander macro scale*" (Participant 2, FG2).

Though not named as such, this shift could reflect the beginnings of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), an awareness of social and political contradictions and a move toward action. Participants spoke of a tipping point in public understanding, where disillusionment begins to shift into critique. The action of naming it signals a shift from private discomfort to collective articulation.

"*It's coming towards a tipping point of sorts because there's more…conversations happening. There's naming that cognitive dissonance*" (Participant 1, FG2).

The growing consciousness was attributed to a broader '*perma-crisis"* (Participant 2, FG2), referring to the cumulative weight of economic collapse, social inequality, and deteriorating mental health. "*The promise was meant to be that if we do that, things will continue to get better… and that that House of Cards has come down quite a while ago*" (Participant 2, FG2). This was framed as "*fertile ground for thinking differently"* (Participant 2, FG2.), in line with dialectical critical theory, participants

positioned contradiction as a site of possibility, where dominant ideologies start to loosen their hold.

However, participants noted that not everyone is equally positioned to recognise or act on this awareness. Noting "*they're usually parents who are able to do the reading and who are able to deconstruct the things we're doing*" (Participant 1, FG1). Highlighting the privilege of time, literacy, and economic security, which determines who can step back and question the dominant logics or opt out. Cultivating critical consciousness requires time, support, and the possibility of dialogue through collective struggle (Freire, 1970). This kind of conscientisation also involves re-politicising suffering (Baró, 1996), rather than individualising hardship participants argued for a collective and structural reframing where professionals should "*have honest conversations with people about what's happening for them and with their families*" (Participant 1, FG2) to support understanding their experiences in context.

6.4.2 De-Schooling Society

In the wake of growing disillusionment within formal education, participants looked beyond traditional reform to reimagine education from the ground up. They emphasised that communities have long been informal, intergenerational, and relational spaces of learning. Education was reframed not as exclusive to schools but embedded within collective life. Participants highlighted grassroots initiatives, summer schools, and local groups as existing examples of alternative educational values:

"*The most generative ideas for me are from from what already exists that's I think that's a way into the imagination by looking at erm the summer schools, the community groups maybe do currently, or what's going on in community spaces outside of mainstream education*" (Participant 3, FG1).

Even APs were discussed as unexpected models of relational, inclusive practice, attributed to their use of "*relationship policies*" (Participant 1, FG1), in which the very inability to exclude was seen to force a different approach. International perspectives also informed participants' visions. Participant 2 cited Scotland's approach to exclusion as an example of systems-level change that foregrounds belonging, autonomy, and relationships.

Participants described a growing ecosystem of alternative learning communities and home education networks, championing self-directed learning and rights-based or consent-led pedagogies. These efforts were not only responses to exclusion but refusals of dominant schooling ideologies. As one participant put it, "*we're not always going to have schooling. Schooling is a thing that's been socially constructed. It's being very aggressively deconstructed now*" (Participant 1, FG2). Reflecting a process of de-schooling, a dual act of withdrawing from institutionalised education and unlearning its logic (Illich, 1971). Participants questioned the "*taken-for-granted legitimacy of schools as the place of knowledge production*" (Participant 3, FG2), advocating for a reimagining of education beyond institutional boundaries.

This hopeful horizon was tempered by an awareness of inequality to opt out. While some families were able to create or access alternatives, others remained trapped in systems they knew were harmful, constrained by time, finances, or risk. "*There are*

loads of parents I work with… they see it as suffering. They say, 'I'm sending my kid to suffer, but what else can I do?'" (Participant 2, FG1). This raised questions about the structural conditions necessary to make alternatives viable. Some participants suggested that Universal Basic Income could help redistribute educational opportunity.

"*A lot of the learning communities folk are really into UBI because they recognise that they don't have enough poor families attending these learning communities… because they can't.*" (Participant 1, FG2)

Even where families did withdraw from formal schooling, participants described how they needed to "*de-condition themselves out of a schooling paradigm*" (Participant 1, FG2). Having to question ingrained beliefs about success, tests, and grades. Even participants committed to resisting exclusion were "*caught up in this trap of not being able to think easily outside of the system that we're currently in.*" (Participant 3, FG2). This reflecting the difficulty of imagining beyond dominant structures, in which uncertainty was also framed as a key barrier.

"*We're really, really bad at feeling uncertain… A lot of the institutions we co-create don't exist because they're helpful or right, but because they just make us feel more certain.*" (Participant 1, FG2).

Systems are sustained not just through coercion, but through emotional attachments to stability and familiarity.

Efforts to build alternatives were described as met with institutional resistance and structural barriers. "*If they put their head up… Ofsted will come in and close them*

very aggressively… quashing any form of dissent against standards and accountability." (Participant 1, FG2). Cultural stigma also further constrained alternative education pathways, describing how home education has been described as *"for hippies and weirdos*" (Participant 1, FG2). Even within schools, those resisting exclusion were often penalised. Inclusive practice was described as requiring effort and cost.

"*Some schools… are really good at stopping exclusion. But only by dint of working incredibly hard against all of those incentives… making sacrifices in a way that can have other negative consequences.*" (Participant 2, FG2)

Participants were careful not to romanticise alternative spaces. Prefiguration was seen as necessary but messy, marked by contradiction, disagreement, and struggle.

"*There's always a risk that I veer into romanticising those spaces… but I think they do offer a glimpse of how things might be done.*" (Participant 3, FG1)

"*We've now got… the way politics of the left work, they're all squabbling… not really aggy, more like bickering. But the relationships can be tricky.*" (Participant 1, FG 2)

Still, these glimpses, imperfect and incomplete, were seen as seeds of possibility. Participants highlighted how resistance lies not only in critique but in creation. The most radical act may be to build something else entirely alongside the machine. To support this work, participants emphasised the importance of vision, dialogue, and visibility. Alternative models need not only to exist, but to be named, researched, and made familiar to reduce anxiety and fear.

"What I'm working on… is trying to get doctoral researchers in to find out what's similar… If people can become less fearful of alternatives to school, they're much more likely to opt into it." (Participant 1, FG 2).

6.5 Overarching Theme 5: Flourishing Beyond the Machine- Education as Growth, Healing, and Radical Belonging.

We now turn towards what lies beyond critique and what could emerge in its place. While earlier themes exposed education as a meticulously designed machine of disposability and harm, participants' narratives also revealed spaces of possibility, warmth, and renewal. Participants envisioned education built upon foundations of care, relationships, and radical belonging.

Figure 10. *Overarching theme 5 thematic map*
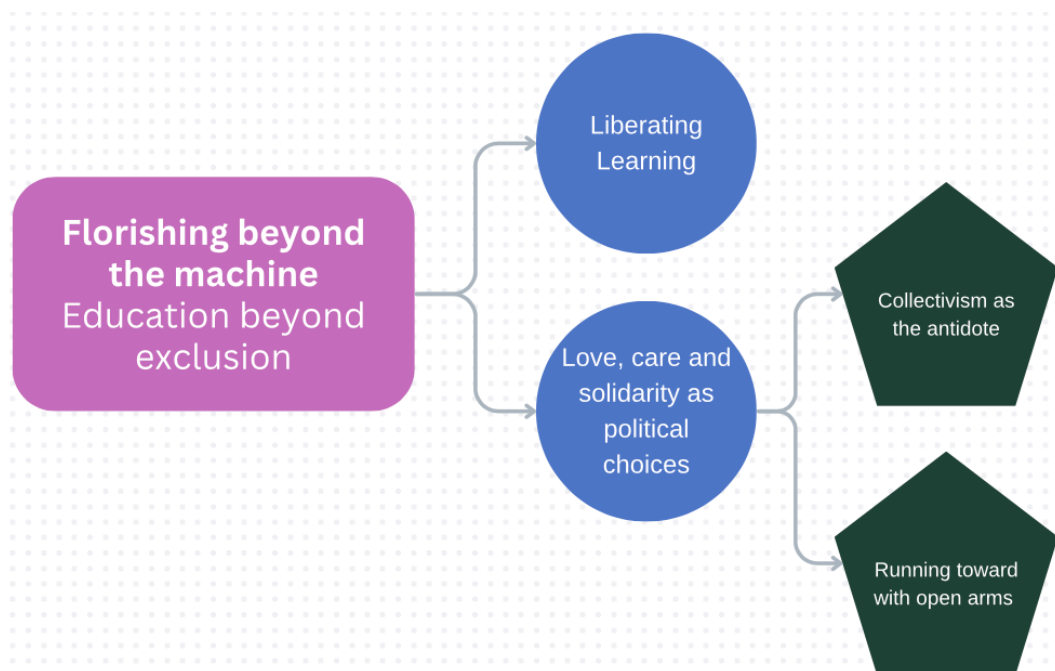
6.5.1 Love, Care, and Solidarity as Political Choices

Participants discussed the values of love, care, and solidarity as conducive to a just system, as opposed to emotional ideals.

"The values and things that school should have…love, care, and solidarity amongst not just the children but the teachers too, the senior leaders so that you prioritise the values of looking out for one another". (Participant 4, FG2).

These commitments were spoken about in relation to challenging dominant ideologies such as individualism and competition within education. Love, care, and solidarity as political matters mean examining these social practices and recognising their interrelatedness with political and cultural systems (Lynch, 2013). This perspective resonates strongly with hooks' (2003) vision of love as radical pedagogy, wherein relational practices of care actively resist dominant, hierarchical logics. Participants noted that embedding such values could produce radically different educational outcomes, even within structures that might appear superficially unchanged.

"*Some of the things that we were talking about might look actually quite similar to what already exists, but it's those values that are often implicit. Erm that produce radically different outcomes*" (Participant 3, FG2).

Participants also contrasted these values against prevailing norms of "*meritocracy, individual responsibility, and resilience*" (Participant 4, FG2), observing these

dominant discourses as inherently oppositional to "*love, care, and solidarity*". I reflected on the juxtaposition between the patriarchal language used to describe current educational systems and the matriarchal language participants invoked when discussing love, care, and solidarity. Such distinctions resonate with feminist ethics of care, which frame care not as a private, individual act but as a relational, ethical practice capable of challenging and disrupting patriarchal and hierarchical systems (Tronto, 1998). Through this lens, relational labour is recentred as fundamental for genuine educational inclusion and equity, highlighting how societal valuations of care practices reflect broader structural inequalities.

6.5.1.1 Collectivism as the Antidote

Collectivism was identified as an antidote to neoliberal individualism, advocating for an orientation which prioritises collective wellbeing over individual goals. At the level of the school, participants spoke of how fostering a collectivist culture would "*counteract the need for exclusion because young people would feel a stronger sense of connection to the school*" (Participant 1, FG1). This speaks to both the concept of belonging and mattering and feeling valued in the school community. Participant 1 used an example of these acts in the Portuguese context, wherein "*a lot of education systems,* (use) *first name basis, people wearing their own clothes*" fostering "*much more warm, authentic, compassionate relationships*" (Participant 1, FG1), highlighting a valuing of autonomy and difference.

Drawing comparisons between educational cultures in Scotland and other European contexts, participants emphasised how collective accountability fosters responsive, integrated approaches to distress. They described Scottish local authorities'

communal framing, in which the Director of Education oversees the education for an entire city, and children are seen as "*the city's children*" (Participant 2, FG1), symbolising collective responsibility.

Participants further emphasised that achieving meaningful inclusion requires extending investment beyond school boundaries into communities. This reflects community psychology perspectives, which frame collectivism and community connectedness as essential for psychological wellbeing (Prilleltensky, 2012). To enact such ideological shifts, participants argued for structural investments in communal spaces, resources, and infrastructures that cultivate relational bonds and solidarity.

"if you if you invested material stuff into communities rather than just schools, then the ideological shift might start to happen too" (Participant 4, FG2).

Structural investment in communal spaces and resources was viewed as critical in cultivating relational bonds and solidarity, offsetting competitive dynamics within schools and nurturing mutual care among parents, teachers, and students. Participants highlighted the importance of schools being deeply integrated and responsive to their local communities, suggesting that historically, a greater connection had existed.

"There was… better integration between, say, grassroots, local community organisations and schools and that they felt more interwoven." (Participant 2, FG1).

Participants advocated specifically for grassroots investments, reflecting a belief in community-driven solutions that challenge top-down, disconnected educational approaches. Participants' advocacy for investing materially and ideologically in communities highlights how reshaping relational structures at a systemic level fosters conditions where care and solidarity can genuinely flourish, reorienting individuals towards collective, rather than competitive, ways of relating and being together.

6.5.1.2 Running Toward with Open Arms

Participants discussed alternative relational responses to distress and harm, as opposed to practices of isolation and punitive exclusion. These relational approaches advocate moving toward students at moments of conflict or distress, rather than pushing them away.

"*One that's just simple to say, but difficult to do, that works around exclusions is when a kid pushes you away. Pull them closer*" (Participant 1, FG2). A quote which echoes the ethos and sentiment relational approaches, which focus on belonging and psychological safety and centre schools as communities of care and nurture (Baker et al., 1997) and require a move away from punitive behavioural responses. Rather than viewing challenging behaviour as something to suppress, participants positioned these moments as integral to the educational process itself, rich with opportunities for collective learning and relational growth.

"*There could be a situation in which errr challenging behaviour, whatever that means and looks like. That is actually the education process, you know how the*

school community together, the peers and the teachers work through that, that that is a form of learning… It's links to, you know, how we live together and how we get along" (Participant 3, FG2).

Here, community conflict resolution appears to be referenced. Participant 2 discussed how some approaches, like restorative justice, are employed in schools. Restorative justice, originally rooted in indigenous and community-led frameworks (Zehr, 2015), seeks to address harm through processes of dialogue, accountability, and communal repair rather than punishment or removal. Contradictions were raised in how restorative practices are implemented in schools, suggesting they have been stripped of their relational and communal origins.

"*Restorative practice is meant to be about. That is more about kind of how to more justly, and and more constructively, fruitfully manage how a community deals with problematic things arising within it.*" (Participant 2, FG1).

This reflection points to the importance of the values underpinning practice. When restorative practices are adopted without clear commitments to relational care, mutual respect, and community accountability, their transformative potential is undermined, becoming disciplinary procedures under a different name.

Participants also discussed *'relationship policie*s' (Participant 1, FG2) as embodiments of these values. Relationship policies explicitly prioritise relational wellbeing, trust-building, and mutual understanding over traditional behaviourist policies (Roffey, 2012). Under such policies, relationships become central to how

schools navigate conflict, framing behavioural challenges not as individual deficiencies but as indicators of relational or communal needs.

6.5.2 Liberating Learning

Tensions between limiting and liberating pedagogies were explored. Alternative educational practices were described as capable of reshaping expectations, affirming students' intrinsic value, and dismantling logics of disposability. Ultimately, it positions them as challenging the logics of exclusionary practice.

Participants discussed alternative education models prioritising child autonomy through practices described as "*rights-based education*," "*consent-based education*," and "*self-directed education*" (Participant 1, FG1). These approaches centre on learner participation, empowerment, and agency (Sandkull, 2005), positioning children as active agents rather than passive recipients in their educational journeys. Consent-based education foregrounds children's rights to actively participate in decisions affecting their learning experiences, necessitating genuine dialogue, mutual respect, and ongoing negotiation. Similarly, self-directed education prioritises children's intrinsic interests, curiosities, and motivations, challenging prevailing paradigms that position adults solely as the "*purveyors of knowledge*."

Participant 1 recounted witnessing a student-led meeting in which children collectively decide "*what they are going to do in the day, what they are going to do in the week, what do they need in terms of help from adult mentors*" (Participant 1, FG2)*. Such practices radically disrupt *"the standards and rigid hierarchies"* of traditional education. Opposing the teacher-student dynamics discussed earlier.

Embracing child autonomy as central rather than peripheral redefines the student-teacher relationship through principles of mutual respect and collaboration.

"We sit with young people and… if they want to explore XYZ, we'll do that… It doesn't deskill the adults it just means you have to bring in the skills you have to support them to answer their own questions". (Participant 1, FG1).

These pedagogical shifts align closely with critical pedagogies (hooks, 1994) that emphasise education as a dialogical, co-constructed process. Participants also discussed different approaches to learning in which emphasis is not only placed on academic output. Instead proposing that there is **"***something about valuing knowledge for its own sake, valuing like kind of interesting discussions for their own sake***"** (Participant 2, FG 1). This highlights the ways in which education is inherently social and that the valuing of dialogue disrupts dominant educational narratives in which knowledge is narrowly defined through credentials and examinations. A premise which reflects sociocultural theories of cognition and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants also critiqued how current schooling structures frequently view free, unstructured time, such as playtimes, as "dead time" (Participant 1, FG2), negating the relational and educational importance of peer interactions.

Participants articulated the need for flexible curricula that are responsive to local community contexts, experiences, and identities and rejecting rigid, standardised curricula. Instead frameworks informed by community-driven needs and developed from within communities themselves were advocating for, implicitly aligning with calls for decolonisation and counterhegemonic approaches that reject dominant Eurocentric epistemologies:

"Communities have the resources and answers within themselves- that's how humans have educated each other since humans existed." (Participant 1, FG2)

A curriculum which is informed by local knowledge systems and responsive to diverse epistemologies creates flexibility and counters the marginalising effects of a universalised curriculum.

Collectively, these perspectives pointed toward transformative pedagogies (Upokodu, 2009), emphasising education as a critical, reflective practice capable of nurturing emotional, ethical, and social capacities. Participants highlighted critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), encouraging students to question social structures, engage deeply, and develop agency to address societal challenges.

"it'll be really good if people were really good at caring for others and nurturing them through difficult times. It's a valuable occupation in the broader sense of people to have… understanding, like emotional, emotional intelligence, understanding others, understanding relational dynamics, understanding like what an insecurity is and how that affects you". (Participant 2, FG2)

In this framing, education moves beyond narrow occupational readiness, instead preparing learners to engage thoughtfully with their communities and society. It calls for schools to nurture students' relational and emotional capabilities and value occupations and skills grounded in care and empathy.

These emancipatory educational practices were also aligned by participants with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), a macro-theory of human motivation and psychological flourishing. Participant 1 explicitly referenced the theory, noting the psychological necessity of nurturing autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational to genuine educational engagement and personal growth.

Participants cautioned against tokenistic implementations of emancipatory pedagogies, highlighting the challenges of the temporary interventions:

"Yeah, it needs to be done as a consistent pedagogy…You know you can't just have one off sessions where suddenly you break down all the social rules and there's no hierarchy and the teachers and the students discuss together as equals bullshit" (Participant 2, FG 2).

Participants emphasised the need for sustained, consistent embedding of liberatory pedagogies within educational cultures, rejecting sporadic interventions in favour of systemic commitment to transformation.

6.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the findings of two focus groups conducted with anti-exclusion community activists. Across the chapter, a story of deconstruction and reconstruction unfolded, revealing exclusion as the product of entrenched narratives, policies, and structural conditions that normalise harm and obscure responsibility. Participants illuminated the mechanisms that sustain exclusion and the possibilities for

resistance, offering insights into the conditions that enable critical consciousness, collective care, and alternative imaginaries to emerge. These findings lay the foundation for a deeper exploration of the tensions between reformation and transformation, which are taken up in the discussion chapter.

Discussion

The research questions are reintroduced, and links between the literature and psychological theory will be explored. Rather than returning to each theme in isolation, links are made across the overarching themes to provide a synthesis of the findings. An abolitionist lens is applied in the discussion, aligning with the study's transformative activist stance (Stetsenko, 2008), emphasising the interplay between critique and action and considers the tensions between reformation and transformation. The chapter concludes by considering the implications for educational psychology, alongside reflections on the study's limitations and directions for future research.

7.1 Summary of Findings as Related to the Research Questions

- How does an abolitionist lens generate alternative understandings of the school exclusion system and its associated practices?
- What conditions create and sustain exclusionary practice, and what might need to be deconstructed or dismantled?
- What alternative structures and practice-based changes are necessary to support an education system which does not rely on exclusion?

The previous chapter traced five interwoven themes that position school exclusion as a complex and multi-layered process produced and sustained through ideological, socio-historical, structural, and affective forces. Rather than a discrete event confined to the boundaries of education, participants traced exclusion's foundations

and sustaining forces as far-reaching. This expansive framing highlights how exclusion is operationalised and justified through discourse, policy, and psychological investments embedded within society and converge within educational institutions. Viewing exclusion through this broader lens enabled more explicit connections between its ideological foundations and material enactments of harm.

Participants' accounts challenged constructions of educational exclusion as inevitable or morally neutral, tracing how dominant discourses influenced by neoliberalism, individualism, and carceral logics obscure and depoliticise its structural roots. Exclusion was described as perpetuated, justified, and operationalised through policy and accountability measures, which further entrench conditions of stress and scarcity within schools. These conditions were identified as intentional mechanisms that restrict care and critical reflection, accelerating exclusionary decision-making. Participants considered how neoliberal frameworks of value contribute to cultures of disposability, impacting who becomes more vulnerable to exclusion and disproportionately impacting racialised, disabled, and working-class children.

The conditions for resisting and generating alternatives beyond exclusionary logics and practice were explored. These visions were rooted in prefigurative education models, international examples, and community-based practices. Importantly, participants centred the affective aspects required for an education system built on genuine inclusion, pointing toward the values of love, care, and solidarity. Across the dataset, inclusion was understood as more than an absence of exclusion and rather as an expansive vision which demands ideological shifts, ethical commitments,

transformative pedagogies, and a genuine plurality of provision. These shifts from individualism to collectivism and compliance to care were framed as political and affective.

7.2 Toward a Critical Ecology of School Exclusion

Bringing together the different systems of influence, educational exclusion could be reconceptualised through a critical ecological lens, extending beyond the immediate, individual, or interpersonal context. The findings highlighted the socio-historical, socio-political, ideological, and structural dimensions of exclusion, offering a multi-layered picture. These accounts coalesce with literature which links school exclusion to broader structural processes (Rizvi, 2024; Kulz, 2019; Parsons, 2005), which position it as nested within an architecture of inequality shaped by historical legacies, carceral logics, capitalist forces, and welfare erosion. The cumulative and interconnected nature of these dynamics offers a meso and macro-level analysis highlighting the influence of power, ideology, and systemic inequality across systems (Gillborn, 2008; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). A critical ecological framing moves beyond neutral models of context and instead examines how systems of power and oppression interlock in the production and justification of exclusion.

7.2.1 Ecology Without Power?

Ecological framings resist reductionist and individualist explanations of behaviour and development. Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model (1979) has been applied to understand disparities in school exclusion (Collins, 2013; McElderry & Cheng, 2014) and to suggest intervention (Murphy, 2022). However, a key limitation of the model is

its under-theorisation of power within and across ecological systems (Houston, 2017), restricting its analysis concerning political and structural drives of exclusion. This poses a barrier to influencing effective change or intervention. Community psychology approaches have attempted to address this gap by incorporating power within ecological analysis (Rappaport, 1987; Trickett, 1994). Power is dynamic and relational, operating between individuals, groups, communities, and through the state. It can be a force of harm or wellbeing (Hook, 2007), which has implications for how psychologists work in solidarity with communities and toward goals of liberation and wellbeing (Lykes, 2001).

This power-conscious approach aligns with participants' accounts and the literature, which describes school exclusion as a product of intersecting power structures (Kulz, 2019; Rizvi, 2024). Exclusion was experienced and understood as operating through interpersonal dynamics and school-level decisions, which are intertwined with neoliberal policy imperatives, structural racism, colonial legacies, and socioeconomic inequality. Power also operated within community contexts, where parents with social capital were described as exerting pressure on schools to exclude certain children.

Whilst indicating the need for social change, it also reveals a challenge as it necessarily means challenging the power of dominant groups within society. Smail's (1993; 2005) frameworks of proximal and distal power offers a helpful perspective. Smail suggests that an individual's perceived agency must be understood in relation to the structural forces which enable or constrain it. In the context of exclusion, this implies a dual role for EPs in preventing exclusionary outcomes while promoting wellbeing in a system which often inflicts harm. This would require a twofold

commitment to structural change to address the distal conditions that maintain educational inequality, alongside empowering families, and communities with the proximal tools to navigate and resist immediate exclusionary pressures.

7.2.2 Structural and Social Inequalities

Broader structural inequalities were discussed as drivers of exclusionary outcomes. While existing literature correlates individual risk factors with exclusion (Paget et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2019; Gill et al., 2024), participants emphasised that these risks are produced and intensified by structural conditions, such as poverty, housing instability, reduced welfare support, and diminished community resources. Rather than background factors, they were considered constitutive forces that shape families' lives in ways that make educational disengagement and distress a rational response to sustained inequality. Social causation theory reinforces this view, highlighting how children from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience psychological distress (Yilmaz et al., 2021), particularly when material deprivation acts as a barrier to support (Carvalho de Mesquita et al., 2022). These conditions are perpetuated by policies which fail to prioritise the equitable distribution of resources (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

This resonates with literature that proposes that school exclusion must be socially and contextually framed (Murphy, 2022; Arnes & Condry, 2021). While contextual models can illuminate risk, participants stressed that such framings must be coupled with socio-ecological change that addresses the broader social determinants of harm. The 'social determinants' framework (Marmot, 2005; McCausland & Baldry, 2023) could be extended to school exclusion. It proposes that socio-structural forces, such as access to housing, income, education, and community infrastructure shape

disparities in outcomes. Although the 'social determinants of learning' are discussed in a US-based context (Sanderson et al., 2021; Levinson & Cohen, 2023), there is limited engagement with how this framework might be applied to school exclusion specifically. Adopting this lens could support a policy shift from individualised explanations to systemic and structural intervention, which aligns with the findings of Valdebenito et al's (2018) systematic review, which concluded that individual and school-level intervention only have short-term impacts on exclusion when wider social inequality goes unaddressed.

English education policy (DfE, 2024) largely overlooks the role of context in the variation of exclusionary outcomes. In contrast, the Scottish policy landscape offers a more nuanced understanding of the structural conditions which create risk for school exclusion. National policy and funding mechanisms explicitly target equity in educational outcomes for children living in deprived areas, correlating with those who are statistically at higher risk of educational exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2025). These efforts sit within a broader public health-informed approach to justice, foregrounding structural reform over individualised correction (Scottish Government, 2022).

Participants also highlighted the differences in the ideological and political-economic environment across countries. Within the English context, participants described significant ideological barriers in the form of neoliberal individualism (Daniels & Thompson, 2024; Done & Knowler, 2022) and post-welfare ideologies (Parsons, 2005), which obscure systemic injustice and limit the space for critical policy analysis. Without addressing these ideological climates and their material effects,

ecological framings are incomplete and risk acknowledging inequality without fully challenging its structural and discursive roots.

7.1.3 The Ideological and Socio-historical

Analytic interpretations of hegemonic narratives and ideological influence are consistent with existing research examining systems of power and their influence on exclusionary practices, ranging from policy technologies (Parsons, 2005) to the racialised policing of school populations (Rizvi, 2024; Kulz, 2019). Positioning this within the current socio-political context, the escalation of exclusionary practices may be reflective of broader conservative shifts by the state, such as harsher narratives related to immigration, welfare cuts, and increased investment in policing. As Rizvi (2024) suggests, exclusion cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but as indicative of a wider ideological project which criminalises vulnerability and further erodes collectivist responses to social harm.

The ecological concept of succession (Kelly, 2006) is drawn upon to emphasise the importance of attending to socio-historical contexts to understand how systems develop over time. Contemporary exclusionary dynamics were traced back to colonial and eugenicist power structures, connecting logics characterised by containment, surveillance, and segregation as tools which uphold disciplinary exclusionary practices and are now recontextualised within education. Although not explored in UK literature, Rudolph (2023) examines racialised carceral logics within an Australian settler-colonial context, which could provide conceptual parallels in their description of how exclusion safeguards normative Whiteness and upholds hierarchical power structures. Safeguarding narratives, as described by participants, functioned as racialised mechanisms of social control, which implicitly prioritise white

safety and security. Discipline was seen as a 'civilising' force aimed at securing behavioural conformity to dominant forms, resonating with literature which examines normative Whiteness and processes of securitisation in school exclusion (Bhopal, 2018; Joseph, 2020; Wright, 2010). This colonial-carceral influence may also be interpreted as influencing racist assumptions within the good/bad (Parsons, 2005) and ruly/unruly (Rizvi, 2024) binaries, offering a link between racially disproportionate exclusion rates and connections to the school-to-prison pipeline.

7.1.4 Structural Violence as an Integrative Lens

The analysis so far is drawn together with the concept of structural violence, which describes how social structures systematically harm or disadvantage individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs (Galtung, 1969). This concept has evolved to encompass forms of "slow violence", harms which are cumulative, routinised, and institutionally embedded (Delgado, 2020; Skotnicki, 2019). These harms operate under the guise of maintaining social order, while reproducing racialised, ableist, and class-based hierarchies (Delgado, 2020). As outlined in the introduction, school exclusion has been linked to the perpetuation and deepening of social inequality, which is magnified across lines of race, class, and disability (Deuchar & Bhopal, 2017). The literature evidences exclusion's long-term consequences, including reduced educational attainment (Gill et al., 2024), restricted employment opportunities (Thompson et al., 2011; Joseph & Crenna-Jennings, 2024), increased interaction with the criminal justice system (Cullellar & Markowitz, 2015; Mowen & Brent, 2016), and health disparities (Obsuth et al., 2024). This multidimensional disadvantage perpetuates a cycle of social exclusion that extends beyond the initial school exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2019).

Structural violence manifests in physical, psychological, or structural forms, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, communities, and wider society (Gebhard et al., 2022). Participants offered an affective and political reading, describing exclusion as a normalised practice through which harm is enacted against already marginalised groups. While participants highlighted the immediate harms of exclusion, such as ostracism, psychological distress, and withdrawal from education, the literature traces its long-term role in entrenching cycles of poverty, worsening health, and increasing criminalisation. Together, this might implicate educational exclusion as a mechanism situated within a broader apparatus of state control and neglect where poverty, racism, inadequate support, and punitive policy responses unite to target already marginalised communities and groups.

This framing echoes existing critiques; Parsons (1999) argued that exclusion is a deliberate act of social control, legitimised by dominant power structures. German (2001 p.12) describes exclusion as a "*culling system*" which deepens the dislocation of vulnerable groups. Perera (2020), drawing on Sojoyner's (2016) concept of "educational enclosure," situates exclusion within a political economy that devalues multiracial working-class children, reallocating them to alternative provision to serve the labour market's lowest rungs. In the comparing APs and PRUs to racialised economic sorting mechanisms, parallels can be drawn between racial capitalism, and the way in which education reproduces racial inequality and creates hierarchically differential value (Gerrad et al., 2021).

School exclusion as a form of harm is legitimised, structurally embedded, and linked

to a broader nexus of control. This reframing pushes beyond how power operates and instead foregrounds the moral and ethical dimensions central to struggles of social justice.

7.3 Shades of Inclusion

Across the dataset, participants reflected on what meaningful change might look like in relation to inclusion. Discussions spanned from international comparisons to reflections on the role of APs. One participant questioned the ethics of investing further resources into a system which perpetuates harm, raising questions as to whether inclusion can be achieved within the current iteration of education or whether it demands something altogether different.

7.3.1 Learning from International Examples

Inclusionary approaches were discussed as a barrier against exclusion in all forms. International contexts in which exclusion does not happen were referenced, such as Portugal, Estonia, and Northern Europe, offering policy and practice-based alternatives which counter exclusionary logics. These systems emphasise relational pedagogy, inclusive values and the wellbeing and participation of all learners.

Many of these contexts are shaped by legal frameworks, global commitments to the 'Education for All' and inclusive education agendas (Alves, 2019; Corral-Granados et al., 2025), reflecting a paradigmatic shift from integration to inclusion. In contrast, the English model of inclusion was critiqued as assimilationist, focused on the

identification of need and adaptation to the dominant norms. Portuguese education policy, by contrast, highlights the systemic responsibility of schools to adapt. Inclusion is not contingent on a SEN label but is grounded in universal design and collective responsibility (Moura & Fontes, 2023). Similarly, Nordic systems, particularly Finland, are rooted in social democratic values of equity, participation, flexibility, and progressiveness (Antikainen, 2006). Notably, the Finnish context is characterised by the absence of high-stakes testing and national school rankings, all of which stand in stark contrast to England's meritocratic and accountability-driven approach.

These examples suggest that reducing exclusion through organising education around values of inclusion, equity, and collective wellbeing is possible. However, participants also noted that even the most inclusive systems are not immune to the pressures of global capitalism (Sahlberg, 2016). Employment-oriented narratives conveyed how education is increasingly structured around productivity, individual competition, and economic outputs. Reflections which resonate with critiques of The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg, 2011), a global educational trend characterised by standardisation, results-based accountability, competition, and market-based reforms, which reshape the aims of education and restrict what success looks like. In England, this has manifested through the academisation agenda, leading to the commodification and fragmentation of public education (Hulme et al., 2024). This is reflected in declining equity between schools and growing inequalities in educational opportunity (Thompson et al., 2021). The implications of GERM extend beyond policy into pedagogy and ethos. Therefore, truly inclusive education must contend with the broader political economy in which

education is embedded. Resisting exclusion also means resisting the structural pressures that commodify learning and marginalise those who do not or are unable to conform.

7.3.2 Home-International Comparisons

Policy contrasts across the UK's four jurisdictions provide a useful reference point for considering the possibilities and limitations of reform. While legislatory mechanisms of exclusion remain across all four nations, they operate within markedly different political economies and policy frameworks (Daniels, 2024; Daniels & Thompson, 2024; Power & Taylor, 2020), resulting in differences in exclusion figures. These differences are often attributed to policies which emphasise inclusion; however, participants and the literature caution against equating lowered exclusion rates with genuinely inclusive practice, as exemplified in the persistence of hidden and informal exclusion (Power & Taylor, 2021; Done & Knowler, 2022), which continues to impact already marginalised groups. Informal exclusion was linked to a lack of supportive infrastructure and resourcing (Power & Taylor, 2021), coupled with cultural and institutional scepticism about the inclusion of diverse learners (McCluskey et al., 2019). Educators were described as questioning their responsibility in educating children they consider to require specialist education, reflecting how difference is often framed as a deficit needing intervention.

Tensions were also noted between rights-based and rule-based frameworks. In Wales, for instance, policy efforts to embed children's rights sit uneasily beside behaviour policies rooted in standardised expectations (Power & Taylor, 2024). Participants similarly reflected on the challenges of reconciling inclusive agendas

within utilitarian disciplinary frameworks premised on the rights of the many, noting how inclusion can become assimilationist under these logics. Whereby children are expected to fit the system, as opposed to transforming it to meet diverse needs. This reflects the ongoing conflation of inclusion with SEN, rather than a systemic commitment to equality (Ainscow, 2020).

The success of inclusive policy depends not only on its stated values but also on the structural and material conditions in which it is enacted. Where exclusion becomes politically undesirable, but systemic inequality remains unaddressed, exclusionary practices may simply shift out of view. Both the literature and participants privilege the understanding of exclusion as a continuum (Gazeley et al., 2015), a process extending across institutional, relational and policy domains.

7.3.3. Inclusion Under Reform

While international comparisons offered glimpses of systems that deprioritise exclusion, they also exposed the limitations of dominant inclusion frameworks. This aligns with critical scholarship that questions the transformative potential of inclusion when pursued within unreformed institutional logics. Slee (2011) argues that inclusion has been absorbed into the existing architecture of schooling as an administrative task, rather than a political project, reduced to diagnosis and access to individualised intervention, leaving the structural conditions of exclusion intact. Ainscow (2007) and Armstrong and Squires (2012) caution that needs-based identification often reproduces deficit thinking. Participants questioned whether the current conceptualisation of inclusion really disrupts exclusionary practice or simply acts as containment. This challenges suggestions that improving SEN identification

and access to intervention would reduce exclusion (Timpson, 2019) and instead marries with a rights-based approach to inclusion (Caslin, 2021; Gillet-Swan & Lundy, 2022), which demands scrutiny of the values and power structures underpinning education and exclusion.

This requires interrogating the structures of normalcy, which refer to a socially constructed hegemonic ideal that marks certain people as other (Davis, 2013). Slee & Allan (2001) propose that inclusion in education carries a corrective impulse of categorisation, differentiation, and hierarchisation. From a critical disability studies perspective, this links to the concept of curative time, a normative expectation that disabled students must progress, develop or be 'fixed' according to timelines of productivity and success (Kafer, 2013). Such framings uphold exclusionary systems by positioning inclusion as conditional on progress rather than rethinking what it means to learn, participate, or belong.

National policy reinforces this by privileging diagnosis and labelling to access support (Porter & Tawell, 2024), locating need within the individual rather than emerging from systemic inequality. SENCOs in Porter and Tawell's study described a discursive shift from viewing children as *at risk* and needing support to *a risk* who should be educated elsewhere, a framing with exclusionary consequences. While identifying vulnerability can highlight injustice (Brown et al., 2017), it can also stratify who deserves compassion. This resonates with the assertion that the mainstream/special dichotomy naturalises exclusionary norms and medicalises diversity (Graham and Slee, 2008).

These dynamics reflect the comfort fantasies educators may adopt to rationalise exclusion, framing pupils as having their needs best met elsewhere. Participants resisted these constructions, imagining inclusive models grounded in relationships, care, and flexibility of curriculum and pedagogy. Such visions echo Allan's (2010) call for a shift from managing difference to valuing it, and Fazel and Newby's (2008) appeal to move from vulnerability to acceptance. For EPs, this invite redefining what inclusion means and a confrontation of how exclusion is legitimised in the name of inclusion.

7.3.4 Taming of the PRU and APs

Genuine plurality within the educational ecosystem was a central concern; in the English context, plurality was critiqued as underpinned not by a commitment to diversity, but by logics of segregation. PRUs and APs were identified as sites where this tension materialised, framed simultaneously as spaces of support and institutionalised mechanisms of exclusion. As Gillies (2016) highlights, APs can function as spaces of "out of sight, out of mind" (p. 51) containment. Within England's neoliberal political economy, they may serve the purposes of system preservation and resource rationing. Containment is not only physical but curricular, where a narrowed curriculum limits life chances and reinforces educational disposability (Gillies, 2016). While it is not denied that some APs and PRUs offer examples of transformative and fulfilling educational opportunities (Bagley & Hallam, 2016), participants challenged this framing as inherently benevolent.

This poses ethical questions about investing in spaces which absorb those most structurally marginalised (Malcolm, 2018), without addressing the structural injustices that produce their exclusion in the first place. Using CRT Bei and Knowler (2023) describe managed moves and off-rolling to APs as manifestations of sophisticated racism (Bei & Knowler, 2023), where seemingly supportive interventions remove racialised students from mainstream spaces under the guise of care. Bauman's (2004) concept of wasted lives offers a theoretical framing for this dynamic, suggesting APs can become sites of educational 'disposal' for children deemed surplus to the performative requirements of mainstream schooling (Mills et al. 2013).

Perera (2020), similarly, describes PRUs and APs as a form of systemic displacement, spaces which enclose children in under-resourced, stigmatised environments, rather than alternative options for thriving. In turn, these spaces are proposed to reproduce inequality and reduce social capital (Millington, 2023). APs in their current iteration could be seen to divest responsibility under the rhetoric of intervention, inviting us to critically interrogate their purpose and function. Are they spaces of possibility or containment? Without systemic transformation, increased investment in APs risks legitimising what Gilmore (2007) describes as organised abandonment, a state logic that neglects structural care while enhancing mechanisms of control. PRUs and APs are also placed within the broader school-to-prison nexus, laying the groundwork for carceral contact. As Gillies (2016) warns, APs are often linked to implicit expectations of future criminalisation, especially for working-class and racialised children. They are not only shaped by neoliberal and racialised policy contexts but are instrumental in maintaining them. Participants

called for an alternative vision of educational plurality rooted in justice, where

multiple pathways are valued, community-embedded, and genuinely inclusive.

7.4 From the Socio-political to the Psychological

This section turns inward to reflect on exclusion's psychological, relational, and

affective dimensions. It considers how institutional norms and the political economy

of education shape experiences of distress, isolation, and belonging. It traces how

macro-level forces are felt at the individual and interpersonal level, aiming to bridge

the gap between the socio-political and the psychological. The section ends by

considering how healing, resistance, and transformation might begin by naming

harm and understanding how structural forces appear in exclusionary practice.

7.4.1. Exclusion and the Ethics of Care

The affective and psychological dimensions of exclusion were described as

entangled with broader systems of power and social, political, and economic

contexts. Exclusion was not only described as a policy act, but as affectively driven.

Exclusion was likened to ostracism, a process which undermines connection, self-

esteem, and agency (Williams, 2007), resulting in long-lasting pain equated to that of

physical injury (Williams, 2009). A similar link has been made in the literature in

which isolation rooms were described as an "*Institutionalised form of ostracism*"

(P.140, Condliffe, 2023). Viewed through the lens of structural violence, these harms

become routine and justified through institutional logics of behaviour management.

Behaviours such as withdrawal, refusal, or disengagement may be reframed as

psychologically intelligible responses to systemic injury, manifestations of resistance

or protective disengagement. This reframing aligns with the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), which positions distress not as disordered but as a reaction to marginalisation and social injustice.

Where post-structural literature maps the circulation of power within exclusionary systems, an abolitionist lens foregrounds the ethical dimensions of harm, repositioning exclusion as morally questionable. It invites a justice-oriented response that centres relationality, dignity, and repair (Fernandes, 2019; Pettersen, 2011). In this spirit, the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993) offers a framework for rethinking the emotional and structural conditions that make exclusion possible. Rooted in feminist philosophy, care is not a private sentiment but a political practice which is socially and institutionally embedded and shaped by systems of value and power. It challenges the dominant utilitarian logics critiqued in the exclusion literature (Done & Knowler, 2020), which frame exclusion as a necessary trade-off for the success of 'the many' (Gillett-Swan & Lundy, 2022). Instead, care becomes a counter-logic which resists the depersonalisation of policy and recognises how care is differentially distributed. To care well is to be attentive to how power shapes who receives care, who is denied it, and on what terms (Lynch, 2013; Pettersen, 2011).

Participants described schools as *"conditional communities"*, where care and safety are earned through compliance and withdrawn in response to disruption. Under such conditions, inclusion is not a right but a reward for normativity. This systemic bias was seen to reflect institutionalised scripts of worth. Noddings' (2005) care-centred pedagogy offers an instructive alternative, positioning care not as reactionary but anticipatory, by creating conditions in which all students feel seen, valued, and connected. This echoes participants' calls to "*pull children closer*" and to foreground

"*love, care, and solidarity*" as foundational values. Invoking a vision of education grounded in unconditional welcome or unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961). Within this frame, inclusion is not something to be earned through performance, but a systemic and ethical obligation.

Relationships, too, are culturally constructed and internalised as social objects (Watkins, 2016), influencing how we enact care which highlights a need to recognise how societal power, normative structures, and dynamics of oppression, particularly around race and disability, mediate our beliefs, values, and relational practices (Chang et al., 2020). A care-based model starkly contrasts the necropolitical and meritocratic logics described by participants, which render some children less worthy of care, safety, or investment. The narratives of disposability explored throughout reflect Mbembe's (2003) notion of necropolitics, the power to determine who is allowed to flourish and who is rendered surplus. In this economy of care, distribution is stratified, racialised, and economised (Puar, 2017).

Participants' accounts of '*childism*' would also need to be confronted, referring to a systemic form of prejudice, where children are considered property and can be controlled or removed to serve adults' needs (Young-Bruehl, 2012). Tillson and Oxley (2020) argue that current exclusion practices violate children's moral rights, noting that they fail to consider the "*inherent dignity*" of children (Article 28.2 UNCRC) and represent a failure to recognise children's capacity for self-direction and moral growth. This devaluation of children's voices and autonomy is not experienced equally, but intersects with other forms of oppression, including racism, ableism, and classism, thereby compounding marginalisation. Critical intersectional

frameworks emphasise how children from multiply oppressed backgrounds are more likely to be constructed as deviant or disposable, and less likely to be granted empathy, protection, or voice (De Finney et al., 2011). Confronting childism requires challenging the hierarchical relational foundations of schooling, demanding a transformation of how we conceptualise authority. A care-ethics framework means reimagining schools as unconditional communities of welcome and viewing children as whole human beings entitled to dignity, agency, and care.

7.4.2 Creating Space for Affective Justice

While the ethics of care names the values that should underpin inclusion, affective justice asks what structural conditions are necessary for those values to be realised. Participants described the difficulty of embedding love, care, and solidarity within a system designed around urgency, scarcity, and performance. Teachers were not portrayed as uncaring, but operating in conditions which restrict time, energy, and reflective space needed for genuine relational work. Armstrong (2018) highlights how such conditions contribute to teacher burnout, limiting emotional capacity to respond compassionately to student behaviour. Warning of a burnout cascade (Oberle & Schonert-Reichel, 2016), a feedback loop where deteriorating classroom climates intensify teacher stress, the erosion of relationships and the likelihood of exclusionary responses. Highlighting the importance of challenging the conditions that exhaust educators' capacity to hold students in care. This framing resonates with the concept of affective justice (Lynch et al., 2009), which refers to the unequal distribution of opportunities to give and receive love, care, and solidarity. Within schools, relational work is often devalued within dominant logics of efficiency and accountability (McKay & Mills, 2023), reflecting feminist critiques of how care is

feminised, privatised, and depoliticised in public institutions (Tronto, 1993; hooks, 2000).

As noted in the literature review, McCluskey et al (2015) applied Fraser's (2003) social justice framework to consider why exclusionary outcomes remain stratified. Fraser's tripartite model of justice has been critiqued for overlooking the affective dimensions of injustice (Lynch, 2012). Affective justice foregrounds how emotions such as empathy, compassion, and patience are stratified. This framework has been applied within the context of APs and PRUs (Mills et al., 2016), but has not been discussed in relation to exclusionary practice in the mainstream. Participants described how some children are viewed as less deserving of care, while others are protected through discourses of safeguarding or academic potential. This shapes who is supported, whose pain is validated, and whose behaviours are pathologised.

These affective inequities are amplified by what participants termed "*comfort fantasies*", institutional narratives that allow educators to maintain the image of inclusion while avoiding the discomfort of confronting systemic harm. Aligning with the earlier theme of *stress by design*, the urgency of institutional life forecloses opportunities for reflection, solidarity, or resistance. Within this environment, emotional labour becomes both undervalued and unsustainable. Affective justice has relevance for EPs in supporting schools to slow down, reflect, and hold space for discomfort. This includes facilitating environments where care is not an individual trait but a shared institutional ethic. This might involve disrupting comfort fantasies, validating emotional labour, and advocating for systemic conditions that allow meaningful relationships to flourish. Affective justice does not negate the need for

redistribution or representation but complements them by naming love, care, and solidarity as essential to educational justice.

7.4.3 From Harm to Meaning: Fostering Critical Consciousness

Where systems of power and social injustice are implicated in maintaining exclusionary practice, participants discussed how young people, families, and communities resist this. Participants described how some families could resist narratives of personal blame and failure, leading to the opting out of mainstream systems and establishing alternative learning spaces. Accounts that align with the concept of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), in which individuals come to understand the political roots of their suffering and act upon the world as agents of transformation. However, participants acknowledged the uneven conditions that enable resistance. Some families had access to social capital, resources, time, or supportive networks that made action possible, while others were constrained by exhaustion, isolation, or structural disadvantage. Emphasising the importance of not only raising awareness but also equitably resourcing resistance and developing social capital.

Participants saw a role for EPs in supporting families to reframe exclusion as systemic, rather than individualised, as a means of reclaiming power and making sense of the oppressive structures school exclusion is rooted in. Liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994) offers a theoretical foundation for this work, which locates psychological experiences within their context, while seeking to re-politicise and reframe distress as a product of systemic injustice and dominant power (Burton & Guzzo, 2020). It centres the experiences of those excluded or marginalised and focuses on transforming rather than adapting to injustice. Afuape (2020) applies

liberation psychology-informed approaches to deliver group-based interventions with young people at risk of exclusion, focused on fostering understanding between their lived experiences of discipline and its connection to broader socio-political structures. Children were supported to link their experiences of exclusion to racism, classism, and ableism, as a means of reclaiming their voice and agency.

Murphy (2022) similarly found that excluded students often recognised their experiences as unjust but lacked the tools to locate them within broader structural oppression. The potential for resistance through processes of re-representation was highlighted by Howarth (2004), where supplementary education and community-based activities supported Black children to re-author stigmatised identities amplified through experiences of exclusion. Participants in this study also stressed the importance of community as a site of resistance, healing, and collective knowledge, calling for investment in youth spaces and alternative learning communities to counter the individualism and isolation of exclusion. Such spaces meet core psychological needs of connection, validation, and belonging (Sarason, 1974), positioning community as a locus of knowledge and strengths (Burton et al., 2007). An emphasis on collectivism and solidarity highlights the potential for reframing the role of the EP to collaborator and co-learner, supporting communities to build social capital, and reflect on systemic harm, to shield and resist against exclusionary risk.

While the literature has discussed the role of policy intervention as a means of change, participants stressed the power of bottom-up transformation. As Spade (2011) argues, social justice does not trickle down from institutions; it emerges from the struggles, visions, and actions of those most affected. Within a liberation psychology framework, intervention extends beyond school, and families and

communities become the drivers of change. This expands the potential approaches to intervention, which could encompass collective dialogue, power mapping, and community organising. Cultivating critical consciousness is a psychological and political act, a means of reclaiming power through meaning-making, solidarity, and action.

7.5 The Imaginary Reconstitution of Education Without Exclusion

Imagining educational futures reflects Levitas' (2013) concept of utopia as a method, a critical and imaginative process of envisioning better worlds not as fantasies, but as politically and materially grounded alternatives. Abolitionist frameworks share this commitment to the utopian as praxis, asserting that institutions built on harm, punishment and exclusion cannot be reformed into justice. Instead, they must be dismantled and replaced with epistemologies and practices rooted in liberation, dignity, and care. While the literature refers to inclusive and rights-based education to prevent exclusionary practice, these approaches remained conceptually vague. Participants build upon this gap, outlining two interrelated pathways to transformation.

7.5.1 Alternative Infrastructures

Participants described the creation of radically different educational spaces outside of formal schooling. In the face of exclusion and systemic inflexibility, families turned to home education and learning communities as acts of resistance and possibility

where they produced examples of prefigurative politics (Fians, 2022) in which alternative futures are enacted in the present. These spaces challenged dominant pedagogical and relational norms and were described as grounded in collective values and community. Participants referenced learning communities and community summer schools as examples of relational, culturally responsive, and pedagogically flexible education.

Yet, participants noted these alternatives remain unequally accessible and often lack institutional recognition. They are constrained by legal, economic, and policy barriers, such as those proposed in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (DfE 2025), which seeks to increase the regulation of home education, constraining parents' ability to deregister their child from school based on judgements of safety and suitability. These constraints intersect with racialised and class-based inequalities in who can access or sustain alternative forms of education (Bhopal & Myers, 2021). Participants reflected on the potential role of EPs and researchers in supporting the legitimisation of non-traditional provision through research, advocating for equitable funding models, and reimagining accountability frameworks which reflect the political and pedagogical values of community-led infrastructures.

7.5.2 Toward a Transformative Pedagogy

Participant 3 introduced the concept of '*non-reformist reforms'*, changes which improve conditions in the present, while working toward dismantling the structures that produce harm. This framing cautions against reforms that repackage exclusionary logics in more palatable forms, whilst resisting the reproduction of

ableism, racism, carcerality, and segregation (Handy, 2024). Rather than revising existing systems, participants reconfigured education altogether, imagining alternative pedagogies, dismantling teacher-student hierarchies, and a commitment to '*love, care, and solidarity*'.

The purpose and function of education were questioned by participants, rejecting schooling as primarily for preparing for employment. Education was positioned as a vehicle for critical citizenship and socially meaningful learning, suggestive of transformative and critical pedagogical approaches. These models move away from instructional teaching models and toward collective reflection, relationality, and ethical engagement (hooks, 1994; Cranton, 2002). Mezirow (200) emphasises the tenets of transformative learning as supporting learners to interrogate dominant knowledge systems and participate in shaping society. In this vision, education is no longer a passive transmission of content but a participatory and transformative process.

Reductive curriculum models and accountability-driven pedagogies were linked to exclusionary practices by participants, who advocated for flexible approaches to learning. Social and transformative pedagogies are argued to buffer against the narrowing influence of globalised neoliberal agendas (Wrigley et al., 2012). Rather than limiting learning to measurable outcomes, transformative approaches call for culturally relevant and contextually situated educational experiences. Social pedagogy, while often confined to alternative provision or pastoral care (Mills et al., 2013; Kyriacou, 2014), was repositioned by participants as essential to inclusive mainstream education. Social pedagogy calls for epistemological inclusion via a

flexible curriculum that is culturally responsive, recognises diverse knowledges, and is rooted in students' lived experiences and local realities (Mills et al., 2016). This is not presented as a trade-off with academic challenge, and rigour is redefined as culturally located, relevant, and relational.

Such approaches also demand a reconfiguration of the student-teacher relationship. Participants collectively critiqued the "banking model" of education (Freire, 1973), where students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge, serving to reinforce the status quo. Participants imagined dialogical relationships grounded in mutual respect, where both teachers and students are learners. hooks (1994) describes this dynamic as one of mutual transformation, where knowledge is co-created, and power is decentralised. Within hook's vision, the classroom is a place of democracy, teaching students to transgress the boundaries of race, sex, and class (hooks, 1994). Learning communities were described as examples in which children exercised autonomy, set agendas, and engaged in collective problem-solving. Adults were positioned as facilitators, where learning was a shared endeavour. Reclaiming autonomy in learning spaces involves listening to children and redesigning systems to honour their choices and capacities (Wall, 2008). This form of learning fosters self-determination, emphasising the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in nurturing motivation and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These are precisely the conditions often denied in exclusionary environments, suggesting inclusive pedagogy must go beyond differentiated instruction to address the relational and structural contexts that shape children's sense of agency and worth.

This also transforms the possibilities for understanding and responding to conflict.

Participants suggested socially meaningful opportunities for learning through conflict resolution, emotional reflection, and community-building. Conflict is viewed as a site of experiential learning and growth (Dewey, 1938), aligning with the Vygotskian emphasis on cultural relevancy, dialogue, and interaction in learning processes (Vygotsky, 1978). While restorative practices were highlighted, participants warned that their co-option within retributive disciplinary frameworks can dilute their potential. To be meaningful, they must address root causes of harm and be embedded within a broader ethos of justice and accountability (McCluskey et al, 2008). This remains difficult within a system dominated by behaviourist approaches (Gus et al. 2007) underpinned by the hegemony of individualism and retributive justice. Transformative justice could offer a framework which attends to these broader injustices and inequities (Nocella, 2011), an approach focused on dismantling the conditions that produce harm in the first place. Such approaches create space for accountability, repair, and learning, challenging the logics that make exclusion thinkable.

7.6 Dissemination of Findings

This thesis will be made publicly available via the Tavistock and Portman Repository and will form the basis for at least one submission for publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal. Findings will be submitted to present at relevant psychology conferences, such as the British Psychological Society's Community Psychology Festival and shared with interest groups such as Trainee Educational Psychologists Initiative for Cultural Change and Educational Psychologists for Material Change. It is intended that findings will be translated into workshops for psychologists,

educators, and activists, designed to translate theory into practice and support the development of transformative and community-oriented responses to exclusion.

7.7 Implications for Practice and Future Directions for Research

A more politically conscious and justice-oriented engagement within educational psychology is called upon. Inviting EPs to expand their reach and reimagine their tools, broadening practice beyond individual and school-based contexts. This includes collaborating with grassroots organisations, parent networks, and community-led initiatives to resist and reimagine responses to exclusion, work which may sit outside traded service models and require new ways of working. Drawing on liberation and community psychology frameworks, EPs are well placed to support processes of critical consciousness, empowerment, and collective action. This might involve intervention which cultivates proximal power and builds social capital. Participatory approaches such as Training for Transformation (Hope & Timmel, 1995) and action research models could provide methodological templates for co-producing community-driven interventions centred on justice and agency. Frameworks like the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) may offer tools to understand how families and children make meaning of exclusionary experiences. Future research could investigate the practical application and efficacy of these approaches in challenging exclusion and fostering transformative, community-based responses.

The findings also highlight the potential for EPs to facilitate socio-politically informed supervision and reflective practice within schools. Embedding this work could foster critical reflexivity about the structural power dynamics that underpin exclusion and

open space for more ethically grounded and affectively just school environments. Future research could examine the development and practical application of affective justice and ethics of care-informed frameworks, particularly in fostering belonging and inclusion for students perceived as different, disruptive, or vulnerable.

Engagement with policy critique, political lobbying, and interdisciplinary coalitions could further amplify efforts to change exclusionary systems (DeCuir-Gunby, 2023). International comparative research could offer insights into conditions which facilitate inclusion in countries that do not have exclusionary structures, with a particular emphasis on comparisons with social democratic or decolonial contexts. Methodologies such as Cultural-Historical Activity Theory may support deeper exploration of how inclusion is negotiated across different political and cultural landscapes.

To realise this, doctoral training programmes are invited to consider the integration of critical, liberation, and community psychology frameworks within their curriculum. Structured engagement with human rights frameworks, political literacy, anti-oppressive theory, and critical epistemologies could support trainees to interrogate how policy, practice, and bureaucratic structures obscure power and naturalise injustice (Fryer & Fox, 2015; Rizvi, 2024). This focus could position EPs as human rights defenders who advocate for the equitable and dignified treatment of children and communities in a politically attuned manner.

Conceptually, future studies might develop and apply structural violence frameworks to explore the socioeconomic, racialised, and policy-driven mechanisms underpinning exclusionary outcomes, which could include mapping 'social determinants of exclusion' to understand intersecting factors such as austerity,

institutional racism, and differential access to psychological resources. Childism (Young-Bruehl, 2012) also holds potential for further exploration as a conceptual lens for understanding how children's voices and agency are systematically undermined within exclusionary systems, particularly concerning intersecting aspects of identity.

Engaging with critical and transformative research methodologies expands how we understand the interplay between psychology, power, and the socio-political context. Sabnis and Proctor (2021) call for the use of critical theory in educational psychology to generate knowledge that empowers oppressed groups and challenges systemic injustice (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). This thesis affirms that call, advocating for the integration of abolitionist, critical, and community-engaged approaches to expand epistemological boundaries and politically engaged knowledge production (Zusho et al., 2023). Future research could explore what abolitionist praxis might look like in practice in educational systems. This includes identifying forms of training, infrastructure, and cultural shifts required for transformation and sustained change.

Finally, findings from this thesis point toward the need for a critical reconceptualisation of inclusion itself. Drawing on insights from disability studies, inclusion is positioned as a radical political project that redefines who and what is valued in education (Slee, 2011). EPs are invited to consider how their work can contribute to a shift from inclusion as accommodation toward inclusion as transformation, an approach rooted in human rights, collective dignity, and epistemic justice (Rizvi, 2024). In line with this, future research could examine the role of transformative pedagogies as a values-led strategy for disrupting exclusionary logics and educational hierarchies. Studies might explore how dialogical, relational, and justice-oriented pedagogies are implemented within mainstream settings, how they

influence exclusionary outcomes, and how they reshape how children are seen and valued. Such an inquiry could also investigate the structural conditions that support or inhibit these practices.

Together, these directions and implications offer potential to expand the conceptual and methodological toolkit of educational psychology, while also advancing a more situated, relational, and justice-oriented understanding of school exclusion.

7.8 Study Limitations

The study's exploratory focus, while enabling imaginative and critical engagement, does not necessarily translate directly into immediate practical interventions or concrete changes. For those prioritising direct praxis or seeking immediate solutions to social injustices, the speculative nature of the research may be viewed as a limitation. Operationalising the study's abolitionist findings within existing contexts of educational psychology practice could also present challenges, given the constraints of LA structures, traded service models, and wider educational policy frameworks. The tensions of attempting transformative practice within restrictive systems warrant further exploration.

The study was conducted with a relatively small, self-selecting focus group of participants, all self-identifying with activist or anti-exclusion positions. While this was appropriate given the study's abolitionist framing, it limits the generalisability of findings. Including alternative viewpoints by bringing these findings to a wider range of participants, particularly those who hold different or opposing views, could provide additional nuance and critical depth. A next step for exploration could be to engage

in research which includes the voices of practitioners, policymakers, educators and families who may hold diverse or divergent views. This would allow exploration into how abolitionist principles are received, contested or potentially integrated within existing educational systems. Such engagement might reveal additional barriers, tensions,or practical constraints to transformative change while also identifying areas of alignment or common ground. In doing so, this could deepen analysis and further strengthen the implications of this research.

The focus group format offered valuable opportunities for collective sense-making and dialogic co-construction of knowledge. Participants were able to build upon each other's insights, reflect in real time, and generate shared visions. But this method also had drawbacks. Some participants' voices were more prominent than others, and the online format, while increasing accessibility it meant that conversation was stilted at times, and there was a reduced capacity for picking up on non-verbal cues. The group setting may have also limited the depth of individual exploration, as some participants might have hesitated to share more personal, complex, or contradictory views in a group space. In retrospect, combining the focus group with individual interviews or follow-up reflective tasks may have enabled a richer, more layered data set.

There was also a challenge in posing large, abstract, and future-oriented questions within a single session. While participants were engaged, the scale and conceptual weight of imagining education beyond exclusion proved demanding. Some participants expressed difficulty accessing speculative or visionary thinking without prior preparation. In hindsight, this suggests the value of integrating creative or workshop-based methods, such as arts-based prompts, scenario building, or critical

pedagogy-inspired group activities, that could scaffold and support deeper engagement with abolitionist imaginaries. Such an approach may have helped participants feel more confident and resourced to think beyond the immediate constraints of the current system.

While the research aimed to examine systemic conditions of exclusion, its broad scope meant that a nuanced analysis of intersectional experiences across axes such as race, gender, disability, and class was necessarily limited. Although structural inequalities were considered in aggregate, the lived, identity-specific experiences of exclusion were not explored in depth.

While the research prioritised imaginative reconstruction over practical realism, this methodological orientation may have limited more critical interrogation of participants' narratives. The desire to create space for prefigurative ideas and hopeful alternatives meant that contradictions or practical tensions within participants' accounts were not a primary focus of analysis. While this is consistent with the thesis' transformative aims, it represents a limitation in relation to examining the pragmatic constraints, tensions, or barriers involved in the realisation of abolitionist futures.

Accounts of the researcher's positionality have been explicitly stated and situated within the research process, enhancing transparency and epistemological clarity. A final log of reflection about the impact of the research can be found in Appendix O.

7.9 Conclusion

Guided by three interrelated research questions, an abolitionist lens was applied to explore how exclusion is produced, maintained, and resisted. Its dual focus asked what must be dismantled and what could be reimagined in its place. It challenges the framing of exclusion as a naturalised feature of the education system, instead locating it as a structurally embedded practice, historically primed and politically produced, and tied to broader regimes of power. This was contextualised within a critical ecological model of exclusion.

A novel methodological contribution lies in applying an abolitionist lens as both analytic and imaginative praxis, enabling a movement between critique and reconstruction. By naming the systems that underpin exclusion while gesturing toward alternatives that are not yet fully realised, it contributes to a body of transformative literature. Utopian thinking (Levitas, 2013) supported this reimagining, a critical practice which refuses to accept current systems as inevitable. The research process itself became a space of political and epistemic resistance, reflecting a commitment to producing knowledge that is not only critical but also generative and hopeful.

Focus groups were held with community activists who engaged in abolitionist world-building. Five overarching themes were developed using reflexive thematic analysis, informed by interdisciplinary theory spanning abolitionism, critical, community, and liberation psychology, alongside critiques rooted in feminism, disability studies, and post-structural traditions. The first two themes explored how exclusion is historically and ideologically produced and influenced; the third examined how it is operationalised and experienced through children and educators' emotional and

relational lives. In contrast, the latter two themes highlight how exclusion is resisted and how it could be transformed.

Exclusion is proposed here as a system of harm and structural violence, which is maintained through carceral logics, racialised and ableist hierarchies, and neoliberal imperatives. These logics produce both material and affective impacts, governing how care is distributed and whose futures matter. Participants offered rich imaginaries of what education without exclusion could look like, from alternative pedagogies to value systems grounded in love, care, and solidarity. These suggestions extend beyond reform and focus on alleviating harm while dismantling unjust structures. These reflections suggest that inclusion cannot be achieved through individualised intervention, but through a radical reconfiguration of inclusion and education's purpose.

For educational psychology, findings signal the benefits of embracing frameworks and methodologies which centre critical analyses of power and justice, supporting a more situated analysis of exclusion as entangled within wider socio-political forces. Within this framing issues of social justice within education cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from the structural conditions that produce it. Suggesting potential for alternative ways of working with and addressing power and injustice through the uptake of community and liberation psychology frameworks. This reorientation also invites attention to the political dimensions of education, including a reframing of social justice that foregrounds affective justice and the equitable distribution of care, recognition, and relational dignity as central to educational transformation.

Whilst not offering a definitive blueprint, it opens a space for imagining education beyond exclusion. While the challenges of structural transformation are significant, this research affirms that alternatives are not only possible but already present in the margins. The task ahead is not to fix the machine, but to build something entirely different. In doing so, this thesis contributes to a body of literature committed to building educational futures rooted in dignity, equity, and collective flourishing.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Narrative literature review search strategy

1. Objective and Scope

The search strategy is included for a transparent outlining of the process taken to identify literature for the review. The review is concerned with identifying literature that links school exclusion as an issue of social justice. There is a specific focus on UK-based papers between 2004 and 2024. The review examines both theoretical and empirical contributions within the literature.

2. Identifying the literature

An initial scoping search was used to explore the topic of school exclusion, theoretical understandings, processes, and as an issue of social justice/injustice.

3. Databases

The literature search was conducted on 20th December 2024 and again on May 2nd, 2025, via EBSCOhost, using the following databases:

- **Education Source**

- **PsycINFO**

- **ERIC**

- **Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection**

- **APA PsycINFO**

- **JSTOR**

These databases were chosen for their relevance to education, psychology, and interdisciplinary research, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the topic. The search was limited to peer-reviewed papers published between 2004 and 2024 in academic journals.

4. **Search terms and combinations**

The search terms were developed to reflect the key concepts relevant to the literature review question and were refined through initial scoping searched. Boolean operators (AND) were used to combine terms, ensuring breadth and specificity.

Table 1.

Initial Search Terms

Search number	Key Concept Mapping	Search terms	Search place	Rationale for terms
1	School exclusion	"school exclusion" OR suspen* OR "permanent exclusion" OR "fixed term exclusion" OR "unofficial exclusion" OR "managed move" OR "illegal exclusion" OR "off-rolling" OR "internal exclusion" OR "hidden exclusion"	Abstract	Captures a diverse range of disciplinary exclusionary mechanisms in line with the exclusion continuum.
2	Systemic	systemic OR social OR structural OR political OR contextual	Full text	Terms chosen to reflect the macro and meso-level influences and processes that impact on exclusionary practice.
3	Injustice	"Social justice" OR injustice OR justice OR inequit* OR inequality* OR OR oppresi*	Full text	Terms which reflect outcomes which are in opposition to

		OR discriminat* OR disparit*		fairness, equity or justice.
4	Country	England OR "United Kingdom" OR Great Britain OR Scotland OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland"	Full text	Relevancy to a UK context

5. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to ensure the relevance of the selected literature.

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Study type	• Academic journals that have been peer reviewed	• Non-peer reviewed articles • Theses
Time and location	• Written in English • Focused on a UK context • Published in the last 20 years (2004-2024)	• Written in a language other than English • Refers to a non-UK context

		• Published before 2004
Scope	• A primary focus on a form of school exclusion or exclusionary discipline in school. • Papers which discuss school exclusion as an issue linked to social justice or wider systemic factors • Papers which apply theory or discuss mechanisms and factors that lead to school exclusion • Articles with and without a research design (both theoretical and research papers are included)	• Papers which do not discuss school exclusion as an issue linked to social justice or wider systemic factors • Papers which discuss the impact/outcome of school exclusion only. • Papers which refer to social exclusion only. • Papers which refer to higher education settings.

6. Screening and selection process

o The initial combined search using terms 1, 2, 3, and 4 returned a total of **<u>395</u> <u>papers</u>** (323 after duplicates were removed)

o Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria:

- Records after screening from the initial search: **22 papers**.
- Acknowledging the limitations that come with electronic searching (Heath et al., 2021), hand searches and snowballing was used to find additional relevant papers. Which produced a further **9 papers**.

o A total of **<u>31 papers</u>** were initially selected for the review.

Appendix B- Summary of papers included in the literature review

Author & Year	Title	Methodology/Analysis/Theory	Participants	Focus
Arnes & Condry, 2021	Criminological perspectives on school exclusion and youth offending	Theoretical paper, criminological lens.	N/A	The paper applies criminological frameworks to understand how school exclusion is conceptualised and its relation to youth offending. It proposes a contextual approach to better understand vulnerability and risk as related to exclusion and offending.
Murphy, 2022	How children make sense of their permanent exclusion: a thematic analysis from semi-structured interviews	Qualitative design, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis.	18 children between the ages of 6 and 16 from	The paper explores how children make sense of their experience of school exclusion. Murphy attempts to understand how their

			four pupil referral units.	experiences are linked to wider issues of social injustice.
Bei & Knowler, 2022	Disrupting unlawful exclusion from school of minoritised children and young people racialised as Black: using Critical Race Theory composite counter-storytelling	Counter-story telling and composite stories using a Critical Race Lens.	Children and young people who have experienced forms of hidden exclusion (number unknown)	Bei and Knowler explore the relationship between racial disparities and hidden exclusionary practices through a critical race lens.
Burnett & Henry Wood-Downie 2024	An exploration of intersectionality and school belonging in the permanent exclusion of Black Caribbean boys in schools in England: Implications for Educational Psychologists	Theoretical paper and literature review, applying an intersectional lens.	N/A	The literature review considers the disproportional exclusion of Black Caribbean boys using belonging theory. Intersectionality is applied to

				understand what constitutes belonging.
Done & Knowler, 2022	A tension between rationalities: "off-rolling" as gaming and the implications for head teachers and the inclusion agenda.	Theoretical paper, application of post-structuralist and Foucauldian theory.	N/A	The paper applies post-structural theory to understand how off-rolling has been constructed through processes of subjectivation and fabrication. The paper aims to disrupt normative assumptions around off-rolling within education discourse.
Potter, Knowler, & Done, 2022	A content analysis of school leaders' conversations about 'off rolling' on Twitter and its relevance to teacher education	Microblogging study method using qualitative data extraction.	Senior school leaders (number unknown)	The study analysed school leaders' tweets about the practice of off rolling to further understand the online discourse related to the use of the practice.

Thompson et al. 2021	Conflict in professional concern and the exclusion of pupils with SEMH in England	Analysed national data sets and legislation and policy guidance. Alongside semi-structured interviews with stakeholders. Thematic analysis undertaken.	6 English Local Authority Officers from two Local Authorities	Assesses the disproportional exclusion rates for children with SEMH needs, exploring how interprofessional working and policy contexts can undermine inclusive practice.
Done & Knowler, 2020	Painful invisibilities: Roll management or 'off-rolling' and professional identity.	Theoretical paper which applies post-structural theory	N/A	The paper proposes the need to examine the nuance around off-rolling practices in comparison to formal exclusion. They apply Foucauldian concepts to explore the tensions between policy agendas and how off-rolling is theorised within the public and political discourse.

McCluskey et al., 2016	Exclusion from school and recognition of difference	Statistical and policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews	156 participants made up of LA staff, children, parents/carers and professionals.	The paper applies Nancy Fraser's model of recognition of difference to understand why children with SEND and multiple disadvantages in Wales, an inclusive policy environment, are still over-represented in exclusion figures and practices.
Done, Knowler, and Armstrong (2021)	Grey exclusions matter: mapping illegal exclusionary practices and the implications for children with disabilities in England and Australia.	Theoretical paper	N/A	The authors examine illegal exclusion processes and draw international comparisons that situate these practices within a global context. The paper offers a thematic map of contributory factors which lead to exclusionary practices.

Howarth (2004)	Re-presentation and Resistance in the Context of School Exclusion: Reasons to be Critical	Observation of community organisations meetings- ranging from parent advice, community activist meetings, and judicial reviews, alongside interviews	4 children who had been excluded and a mixture of 12 parents, siblings, teachers, support workers and professionals.	Howarth applies a critical social representations theory to explore what representations sustain exclusionary practices and how stigmatising representations of Black children contribute to marginalisation. Howarth also explores how these representations are resisted.
Kulz (2019)	Mapping folk devils old and new through permanent exclusion from London schools	Semi-structured Interviews analysed using discourse analysis	A mixture 26 of parents, headteachers, and LA workers	Kulz examines the dynamics of racialisation and marginalisation behind exclusionary processes. Utilising discourse analysis links are made between securtisation and neoliberal governance as

			related to exclusionary processes and practices.
Caslin (2021)	'They have just given up on me' How pupils labelled with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experience the process of exclusion from school.	Case studies and the application of a disability study lens	13 pupils with their parents and teachers.	The paper applies a disability studies lens to examine how children with the label of SEMH experience exclusion. It draws on the ways in which the education system systemically fails these children and families.
Wright (2010)	Othering difference: framing identities and representation in black children's schooling in the British context	Two-year ethnographic study across 5 schools and interviews. Examined through a lens of intersectionality.	62 children.	The paper captures the experiences of black children and othering in education. The study explores the nature, pattern and processes of exclusions for this group.

Joseph, 2020	Navigating neoliberal school spaces: Parent and school staff perspectives on racially disproportional school exclusion in England	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Application of critical race theory and interpretative phenomenology	14 participants made up of pastoral workers, educators, social workers, and parents.	The paper applies critical race theory to connects neoliberalism and race to disproportional school exclusions.
Carlile, 2012	An ethnography of permanent exclusion from school: revealing and untangling the threads of institutionalised racism.	Ethnographic study from authors experience of working in a Local Authority Children's Department.	N/A	The author examines enactments of institutional racism in decisions around exclusion within a local authority.
Parsons, 2009	Explaining sustained inequalities in ethnic minority school exclusions in England- passive racism in a neoliberal grip.	Theoretical paper	N/A	National exclusion policy is critiqued for perpetuating passive racism within the school exclusion policy. An argument is presented about the intersection with neoliberalism.

Rizvi, 2024	Punishing unruly minoritized children and young people	Theoretical paper. Application of framework of unruliness	N/A	Falguni Sheth's framework on unruliness is applied to understand the intersecting mechanisms that exclude and punish minoristised children. The paper examines how race is used as a political tool to other.
McKee, 2023	An error of punishment defences in the context of schooling.	Theoretical paper	N/A	A theoretical paper which considers the function of discipline within schooling.
Power & Taylor, 2021	School exclusions in Wales: policy discourse and policy enactment	Semi-structured interviews collected from two different research projects.	Headteachers in Welsh and English context (number unknown). Senior	The paper examines official and hidden exclusion in the Welsh policy context. It explores how policy is enacted at the local level, and the conditions which might undermine anti-

			policy makers in Wales.	exclusionary practices and processes.
Gillet-Swan & Lundy, 2022	Children, classrooms and challenging behaviour: do the rights of the many outweigh the rights of the few?	Theoretical paper which applies human rights theory.	N/A	The challenges of implementing a rights-based framework in relation to decision making in exclusions is explored. A body of human rights-based literature and theory, the 3 C's model is applied to support decision making in exclusionary practice.
Daniels & Thompson, 2024	Excluded Lives: a 'home international' comparison of school exclusion	Applies a Cultural Historical lens to a series of research projects.	Unknown	Conducts a home-international comparison of the political economies of school exclusion across the UK. It draws on a series of studies

				results from the Excluded Lives Project.
Gazeley, 2015	Contextualising inequalities in exclusion rates: Beneath the 'Tip of the Ice-Berg'	Focus groups, interviews, analyses of publicly available information concerning school performance data, case studies.	8 Tutors, 55 LA staff, 53 young people.	Study examines the link between inequalities and processes of school exclusion. An attempt is made to situate school exclusion and contextualise school exclusion figures as related to disproportionality.
McCluskey et al. 2024	School exclusion policies across the UK: convergence and divergence	Application of Bacchi's (2009) what's the problem represented to be and Hyatt's critical policy analysis framework.	N/A	The study aimed to explore the underwiring of policy documentation and interrogate taken for granted assumptions in their attempts to solve the problem of exclusion.

Porter & Tawell, 2024	At risk or a risk? SENCOs' conceptualisations of vulnerability and risk in relation to school exclusion	Semi-Interviews analysed utilising a activity theory lens.	11 SENCOs in England	An exploration of how SENCOs conceptualise vulnerability and risk, and inform their responses to children at risk of school exclusion.
Daniels, Thompson, and Tawell, 2019	After Warnock: the effects of perverse incentives in policies in England for children with special educational needs	Analysis of published data sets related to legislation and policy guidance and semi-structured interviews. Analysed using a thematic analysis.	27 Stakeholders made up of Government and LA officers, a lawyer, and senior social worker.	The paper examines the differences between policy imperatives influenced by the Warnock report, toward the current policy changes related to school exclusion now. There is a particular focus on how the current policy context creates perverse incentives to exclude children with SEND.

McCluskey et al., 2019	Exclusion form school in Scotland and across the UK contrasts and questions.	Analysis of data sets on exclusion, legislation, and policy guidance. Semi-structured interviews. Implementation of a cultural historical analyses.	26 Stakeholders across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.	A cross national study of jurisdictions across the UK, which investigates disparities in school exclusion. A particular focus on the Scottish context and policy.
Power & Taylor, 2024	Rights, rules, and remedies interrogating the policy discourse of school exclusions in Wales.	Analysis of 40 Welsh national policy documents using qualitative thematic analysis.	N/A	The paper explores Wales policy context, to reveal silences and tensions in relation to their rights-based approach. The authors propose there is a mismatch between the causes of exclusion and the interventions proposed.

Tawell, 2025	Enacting national exclusion policy at the local: is it black and white?	Semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations of Local Authority processes.	7 headteachers and 27 teachers working in 16 mainstream schools and 2 alternative provisions.	The paper explores how exclusion policy is interpreted and enacted in different English Local Authority contexts.
Thomas, 2025	Who deserves help & who is bad? Race and class in 'doing' school exclusion	Ethnographic approaches in a PRU, drama-based group work, focus group discussions, and interviews. Analysed using an intersectional and post-structural framework.	5 Boys aged 14-16, 20 professionals comprising of teachers, teaching assistants, and social workers.	A qualitative study on school exclusion which focuses on pupils in a pupil referral unit. With an aim of understanding race and class dimensions of lived experience within exclusionary processes.

| Cole et al., 2019 | Factors associated with high levels of school exclusion, comparing the English and wider UK experience. | Semi-structured interviews. | 27 stakeholders in English local authority contexts | Compares factors associated with exclusion and inclusion in England. |

Appendix C- Recruitment poster

PARTIPANTS REQUIRED FOR DOCTORAL RESEARCH

EXPLORING RADICAL AND NON-REFORMIST ALTERNATIVES TO SCHOOL EXCLUSION

Who am I?

I am Christie, a Trainee Child, Community and Educational Psychologist. I am completing the second year of my doctoral training at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust.

About the research

The research takes up a critical position concerning the use of school exclusions in the UK, it acknowledges that school exclusions contribute to a system which maintains and perpetuates inequity and disproportionality for black, global majority, and working-class communities.

The research aims to examine alternatives to exclusion and associated practices in schools. It hopes to explore approaches that look beyond the current framework of the school exclusion system and consider how we pursue change at the foundation of society. It hopes to generate further critical thought in mainstream Educational Psychology practice around the school exclusion system.

Your participation

You would be required to take part in a series of two focus groups, which will be facilitated either in person (in London) or online dependent on applicant circumstances. Each focus group will consist of 4 to 8 participants and last between 60 to 90 minutes. The focus groups will involve discussing your thoughts about what alternative approaches, practices, and interventions would be needed at both a school, community, and societal level, if the school exclusion system did not exist.

Are you eligible?
I am looking for individuals who...

- Self identify as having an interest in political, philosophical, or social approaches which are aligned with systemic change.

- Belong to a UK-based grassroots group, charity, or non-governmental organisation who critique or campaign against school exclusions.

- Ideologically oppose the use of school exclusion.

To register interest please email: cghent@tavi-port.nhs.uk

NHS
The Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust

Appendix D- Participant Information Sheet

Child, Community and Educational Psychology Doctoral Research Project-

Information to Prospective Participants

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee

This study has been approved by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics

Committee.

The Researcher(s)

Christie Ghent (Trainee Educational Psychologist and doctoral student at the

Tavistock on the Child, Community and Educational Psychology course)

Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, 120 Belsize Lane, London, NW3 5BA

cghent@tavi-port.nhs.uk

07811527585

Under the supervision of Dr Dale Bartle (Associate Lecturer and Doctoral Research

Supervisor)

Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, 120 Belsize Lane, London, NW3 5BA

DBartle@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to

consider in deciding whether to participate in this study. Please take time to read the

following information carefully, please contact the researcher by email if anything is not clear, you have questions or would like more information about the study.

Project Title

A socio-political critique of school exclusion in the United Kingdom. Exploring radical and non-reformist alternatives to exclusionary practice.

Project Description

Purpose

The research is being undertaken to contribute towards the researcher's doctoral thesis. This research seeks to explore alternatives to exclusionary practice within the context of the UK schools. The research seeks to explore the views of anti-exclusion community activists to support in identifying what alternative approaches to supporting wellbeing and behaviour might look like in the absence of school exclusions. Specifically, it will examine abolitionist alternatives, which aim to move away from the use of disciplinary punishment as an answer to social issues, and instead looks toward preventative and community centred approaches.

What does it involve?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a series of two focus groups with other participants. The first focus group will be focused on exploring what would need to be dismantled to move away from the use of school exclusion and the second focus group would be focused on what would need to be 'built up' to facilitate the eradication of a school exclusion system.

There will be a total of 4 to 8 participants within the focus group, which will last for approximately 60-90 minutes. The focus groups will take place between the months of August-October 2024 dependent on participant availability.

They will be facilitated by the researcher Christie Ghent and involve discussing a series of questions with a small group of participants related to the research topic. The focus group will be recorded (as an audio recording) and transcribed before being analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. I will provide you an opportunity to comment on the transcription and analyses, although this is optional, and you are not required to give feedback if you choose not to.

You will be invited to take part in the focus groups in a private room located in the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust for a focus group with other participants. However, if I do not recruit enough participants that are able to attend the focus group in person, it will be moved online to take place on Microsoft Teams. In the event the focus group takes place online participants will be sent the interview schedule in advance to prepare.

<u>What are the possible risks of taking part?</u>

The researcher acknowledges that discussing issues centred around school exclusion may be sensitive or emotive. However, the open nature of a focus group gives freedom to choose what to share. To mitigate impacts on participants emotional wellbeing, the researcher will ensure group rules are co-constructed prior to beginning sessions. Throughout the focus groups the researcher will be vigilant to the wellbeing of participants, and the sessions will be followed by a check-in and

debrief. At all points of study, participants will have the option to access additional support from myself or other services, which will be signposted if required.

Consent and Confidentiality

<u>What will happen to the findings of my research?</u>

The findings will be typed up as part of my thesis which will be read by examiners and be available through the Tavistock and Portman library. I may also publish the research, at a later date, in a peer reviewed journal. Participants will have the option of reading a summary of my findings or the full thesis once analysis has been completed. Findings may also be shared via conferences and webinars at later dates. Identifying features will not appear in any publication related to this study and will not be shared with any other parties. Anonymised quotes may be used in the report.

<u>What happens if I do not wish to carry on with the research?</u>

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary and if you do not consent to participate, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time before or during the focus group, without giving a reason. It will not be possible to withdraw individual's data upon completion of the focus group, as the nature of a focus group means individual contributions will be intertwined with others. However, if you do choose to participate and you wish to withdraw your personal information either during or after the focus group has taken place, I can ensure you that your personal contribution (quotes) are not included in the reporting of the study. If this is not

satisfactory the focus group can and will be stopped entirely and the recording deleted.

Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

Will participants' information be kept confidential?

Yes. All records related to participation in this research study will be handled and stored securely on an encrypted drive using password protection. Any hard copies of information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, only accessible to the researcher. Identity on both hard and electronic records will be indicated by a pseudonym rather than a name. Only the researcher Christie Ghent will have access to datafiles containing identifying information.

If the focus group is to take place online, I will be required to agree to the conditions of the software in terms of privacy, data storage and collection by the software company.

All data collected and generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and the Trust's data Protection and handling Policies: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/. Personal data will not be kept for longer than is necessary, in line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data will be stored for 10 years. Following this, all electronic and hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

<u>Are there times when data cannot be kept confidential?</u>

As the proposed research involves a focus group interviews, participants should be advised that there will be distinct limitations in the level of anonymity afforded. The sample size may also mean that participants may recognise some examples and experiences shared in the focus group. Should you participate, you will be asked to respect the privacy of other focus group members by not disclosing any content discussed during the study. To protect participants identities, pseudonyms will be used, and any identifiable details changed.

Confidentiality is subject to legal limitations, and if information which suggests that there is risk of serious harm to self or others, this cannot be kept confidential, and a joint decision will be taken regarding who to tell.

Further information and contact details

If you have any further questions or concerns about the research, please contact me: Christie Ghent at cghent@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

<u>Appendix E- Pre focus group briefing sheet</u>

Focus Group Briefing

Research description

Thank you for participating in my research which is exploring radical and non-reformist alternatives to school exclusion. It hopes to consider how we can create sustainable alternatives and equitable outcomes for communities who are disproportionality impacted by school exclusion.

The answers to this research do not need to be rooted in the 'here and now', but can also look beyond current practices and toward an imagining of a future in which school exclusion does not exist. It is an invitation to consider alternative practice and approaches at the level of the individual, the school, the community, and socio-politically.

The research takes place over a series of two focus groups. The first focus group focuses on what would need to be deconstructed to allow us to move away from the use of school exclusion, both materially and immaterially (structures of power and ideology). The second focus group is focused on what would need to be built up in its absence.

Identifying myself within the research

I am being clear and transparent about my position in this research, I am engaged in political activism and identify as a police and prison abolitionist. These aspects have informed my motivation for engaging in this research and will form part of my thesis itself. I am interested in moving away from disciplinary punishment as an answer to social issues and instead engaging with approaches that are community centred and align with transformative justice. As a Psychologist I wish to acknowledge the role the profession plays in upholding systems of power and control. Through engaging in critical research, I hope to see what contributions this might make in offering alternative perspectives and practices to the field of educational psychology.

<u>Focus group</u>

The focus group will involve discussing a question with a small group of participants. There are no right or wrong answers, instead participants are encouraged to converse and respond to one another. This is an opportunity to share your own thoughts and opinions and construct meaning together.

As this research is exploratory, I am using a less structured format of focus group. It will begin with a broad initial question which the group should discuss throughout the duration of the focus group. My role will be to facilitate the group, but I will do so with low involvement. I may occasionally ask a follow up question or ask for participants to expand on a point of discussion. However, I will not actively participate or contribute to the discussion.

The focus group will last between 1 hour to 90 minutes.

Group rules and guidance

To support the smooth running of group and create an environment in which all can share their views, the following rules have been constructed:

- Participants are encouraged to take part in a quiet space where they will not experience disruption.
- Video cameras should be turned on by all participants throughout the session.
- Challenge is welcome, but please be sensitive of people's personal stories and beliefs.
- Be mindful of sharing the space with other participants and ensure everyone can contribute and be heard.
- Be mindful of confidentiality, personal experiences and information should not be shared outside of this space.
- Respect and listen to other perspectives and contributions.
- In the interest of staying on track and timekeeping please do not be offended if I ask you to summarise your point or interrupt you.

The questions

First focus group question:

"What do you imagine a society and education system to be like if school exclusions were abolished? What structures, practices, or approaches would need to be

dismantled or deconstructed and what challenges might be faced?"

Second focus group question (Date to be arranged following first focus group):

"Imagine a society and education system in which school exclusions were abolished. What would have been built up and put in place to support communities, schools, and individuals?

In the absence of school exclusion how would we account for safety, behaviour, and wellbeing?"

The Researcher(s)

Christie Ghent (Trainee Educational Psychologist and doctoral student at the Tavistock on the Child, Community and Educational Psychology course)

Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, 120 Belsize Lane, London, NW3 5BA

cghent@tavi-port.nhs.uk

07811527585

Under the supervision of Dr Dale Bartle (Associate Lecturer and Doctoral Research Supervisor)

Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, 120 Belsize Lane, London, NW3 5BA

DBartle@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk

Appendix F- Interview Schedules and Scripts

1) **Welcome**

Thank for time. Introduce self and ask participants to introduce selves. Followed by

warmup exercise.

2) **Overview of research**

Thank you for participating in my research which is exploring radical and non-

reformist alternatives to school exclusion. It hopes to consider how we can create

sustainable alternatives and equitable outcomes for communities who are

disproportionality impacted by school exclusion.

The answers to this research do not need to be rooted in the 'here and now' but can

also look beyond current practices and toward an imagining of a future in which

school exclusion does not exist. It is an invitation to consider alternative practice and

approaches at the level of the individual, the school, the community, and socio-

politically.

The research takes place over a series of two focus groups. The first focus group

focuses on what would need to be deconstructed to allow us to move away from the

use of school exclusion, both materially and immaterially (structures of power and

ideology). The second focus group is focused on what would need to be built up in

its absence.

3) **Identifying self**

I am being clear and transparent about my position in this research, I am engaged in political activism and identify as a police and prison abolitionist. These aspects have informed my motivation for engaging in this research and will form part of my thesis itself. I am interested in moving away from disciplinary punishment as an answer to social issues and instead engaging with approaches that are community centred and align with transformative justice. As a Psychologist I wish to acknowledge the role the profession plays in upholding systems of power and control. Through engaging in critical research, I hope to see what contributions this might make in offering alternative perspectives and practices to the field of educational psychology.

4) **<u>Focus group</u>**

The focus group will involve discussing a question with a small group of participants. There are no right or wrong answers, instead participants are encouraged to converse and respond to one another. This is an opportunity to share your own thoughts and opinions and construct meaning together.

As this research is exploratory, I am using a less structured format of focus group. It will begin with a broad initial question which the group should discuss throughout the duration of the focus group. My role will be to facilitate the group, but I will do so with low involvement. I may occasionally ask a follow up question or ask for participants to expand on a point of discussion. However, I will not actively participate or contribute to the discussion.

5) **<u>Ethics</u>**

It will be outlined that the session will be recorded, and no names (including places/groups/ identifying characteristics) will be used in publication. The transcription will be typed up, analysed and then permanently deleted. Everything Limitations around disclosures will be outlined again.
Participants will be reminded that participation is voluntary, and they are free to withdraw. Limitations around withdrawal of data after the group will be explained.

6) **Group rules and guidance**

To support the smooth running of group and create an environment in which all can share their views, the following rules have been constructed:

- Participants are encouraged to take part in a quiet space where they will not experience disruption.
- Video cameras should be turned on by all participants throughout the session.
- Challenge is welcome, but please be sensitive of people's personal stories and beliefs.
- Be mindful of sharing the space with other participants and ensure everyone can contribute and be heard.
- Be mindful of confidentiality, personal experiences and information should not be shared outside of this space.
- Respect and listen to other perspectives and contributions.

- In the interest of staying on track and timekeeping please do not be offended if I ask you to summarise your point or interrupt you.

In a moment I shall ask an opening question and I would like you to discuss your thoughts as a group. The session will run for between 60 to 90 minutes and a 10-minute warning will be given before the session ends.

7) Questions from participants will be invited

"What do you imagine a society and education system to be like if school exclusions were abolished? What structures, practices, or approaches would need to be dismantled or deconstructed and what challenges might be faced?"

8) Conclusion

The researcher concludes the discussion by thanking participants for their ideas and giving time for the group to debrief with the facilitator.

Appendix G- Extracts from reflective research diary

A focus on historical function as related to colonialsm → interesting! found some aus literature on this, but not UK based.

Throwing up questions about where the site of change begins + ends... is it possible to treat exclusion in isolation to these wider structures?

- Picking up on themes of who is valued + who is disposable... reminding me of marxist disability theory + who is valuable to the economy, verses who is not.

- On the first page the use of 'human beings' as opposed to students keeps coming back to me, this feels very meaningful → there's something about schooling which denis or stops peoples potential as humans being realised?

Appendix H- Examples of manual coding

Handwritten annotations (top):
- inclusion based on integration not valuing of difference.
- inclusion based on making others change.
- inclusion based on individual change, not system change.

think more →

like, well, we've got this, like, kind of lumpen kind of others over here and we need to think about how to better integrate them, rather than challenging the extent to which inequality has been allowed to get ridiculous. And those those class inequalities, both in terms of economic status, but also in terms of just stigmatisation. Is incredibly, deeply entrenched and what, again, going back to the Scotland example, what struck me is Scotland is obviously not some wonderfully fully egalitarian society and neither is it not got an issue with racism and related problems. However, there is this sense of solidarity is palpable and a sense that, like when and and all the local authorities run the schools, which is another interesting thing. That means that the Director of education within a particular city is effectively the head teacher for the whole city and thinks about it in that sense. Like, this is a place we've got thousands of primary and secondary students and I'm responsible for for them that they're they're they are the city's children in a way that you don't have the ludicrous fragmentation you get in England. But I think what you also get is less of a heavily classed understanding of society in general, what what school is for and less of a sense of. There are others who are a problem, and either those others get excluded or we find ways of awkwardly including those, those others, but they're always going to be others. And I think again that. Is deeply entrenched in England and I think would still be a problem even if we found a way to have no exclusions. I think that would manifest it, that that would manifest itself in other ways and would require other forms of change beyond just getting rid of exclusions.

Handwritten (left margin):
- international comp.
- solidarity among people.
- schools are decentralised from gov.
  : LAs run schools
- Scotland less class division

Handwritten (right margin):
- Something about closeness + responsibility?
- children seen as mattering
- fragmentation of English education system
- lack of 'true' inclusion.
- tokenistic inclusion

Handwritten (below text): can't get rid of exclusion in isolation ←

Participant 1: It's the sort of systematic othering [participant 2 name] isn't it?

Handwritten: → exclusion based on othering   othering as

Participant 2: Yeah, that got that goes with with deep historical roots and a lot of. —

Handwritten: historical influence

Participant 1: ((overlapped)) Very deep.
Handwritten: - economic incentive in exclusion
- emotional investment in exclusion

Participant 2: And I think a lot of kind of. There's a lot of investment in its continuation kind of investment of different kinds, like economic investment in the hoarding of wealth of a certain class of people, but then also kind of a like a kind of emotional investment in class is quite an interesting thing. And I think the an emotional investment in the idea of disappearing some people off or some people being the cause of social problems, we don't have social And obviously I've, I've done a lot of stuff about violence. Violence is seen as some self-generated property of certain kinds of young people. As opposed to the predictable result of certain forms of structural harm, and I think that that that's a strongly again, go back to the comfort fantasy thing, [participant 4 name] which I think is a really helpful idea. Like, that's quite a comforting notion to think that fundamentally our country is fine. There's just certain kinds of people who are the problem, be it the young people who

Handwritten (left margin):
(R) individual blame.

willful neglect of societal issues

Something about this maintains a system.

individual blame absolves societal fault. →

Handwritten (right margin):
- comparison to carceral system.
- Violence is an intrinsic trait (comfort fantasy)

Handwritten (bottom):
- Violence emerges from structural harm.

discourses limit ??

14   - Dominant narratives limit alt. ways of thinking about...

Appendix I- An example of coded extract from NVivo

DATA
- Files
- File Classifi...
- Externals

CODES

CASES
- Cases
- Case Class...

NOTES
- Memos
- Annotations
- Memo Links

SEARCH
- Queries
- Query Res...
- Node Matri...
- Sets

MAPS
- Maps

OPEN ITEMS

Name
Focus group 1
Focus group 2

Focus group 1

workload. It feels good for them. They feel like they're doing the right... not really, not always producing the best outcomes for the child. And... forgotten in the whole process of exclusion. I'm not really sure it's ab...
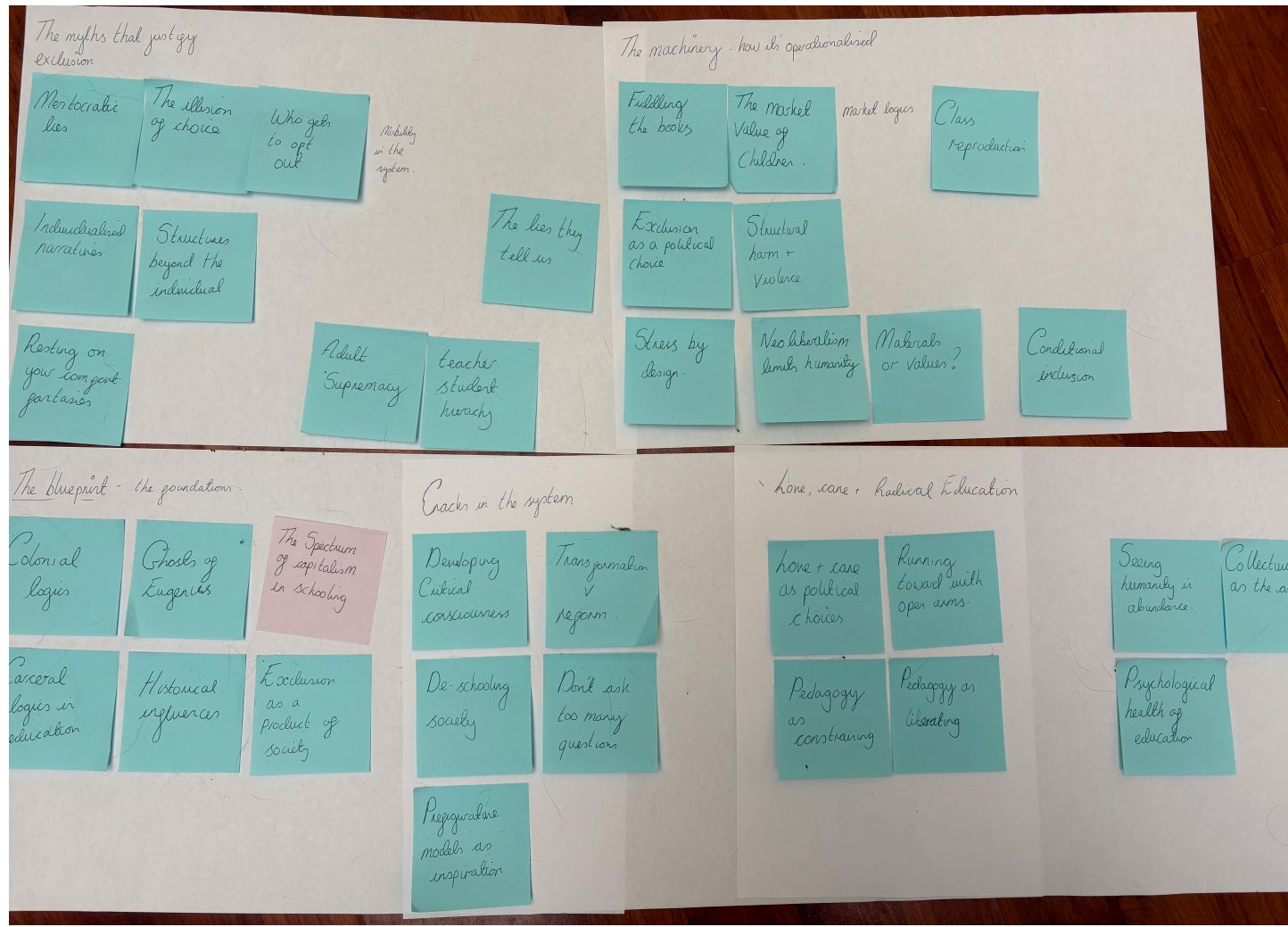
Participant 1: No, it certainly is isn't it, [participant 4 name]. It's the... it? We're excluding them to meet their needs. Then what's essentially... the school's needs, which is quite interesting Orwellian twisted langu... just think as you're talking there around erm some of the other compl... have in England that is slightly bizarre in terms of how education phi... are framed and decided upon. So I'm just thinking about you dismant... and thinking about what you guys are talking about in terms of capita... terms of how things are structured and just even looking to Scotland,... got the Curriculum for Excellence there, which if you speak to Scotti... it was a significant paradigm shift. You know where they're positionin... centre and looking at behaviour as a form of communication, which i... obviously from psychological research over many, many years now a... theories both bear that out, don't they? And things like belongingness... theory and things like that are in there.
Because you've got academics who are part of the policy making pro... thinking about England, seems like it makes sense here, right? Becau... colonial approach that we have that [participant 2 name] brings up or... we're doing is really segregating off people who we don't like, people... problematic and ignoring the research that we know is very efficaciou... and behaviour as communication. And that's very noticeable, right, th... in the DfE, or at the levers have changed there Who are actually expe... behaviour, you know, and obviously I'm a psychologist, I'm slightly b... point of it is it's the study of human behaviour, and you've never had... contribute ever to a behaviour policy in England, whereas you do in S... Finland, you do in Portugal, you do in Estonia. So that's a really inter... problematic thing that we have. Because then it's not on teacher train... philosophical documents. Is it like the behaviour policies and it's not... by any of the institutional bodies like Ofsted. So they're not looking f... things that work. They're looking for things that are creating perverse... interesting element, isn't it, that we haven't got the right people in the... are made, I guess.

Appendix J- Initial themes developed using Miro software

Appendix K- Refined themes manual process

The myths that justify exclusion
- Meritocratic lies
- The illusion of choice
- Who gets to opt out
- Mobility in the system
- Individualised narratives
- Structures beyond the individual
- The lies they tell us
- Resting on your comfort fantasies
- Adult 'Supremacy'
- teacher student hierarchy

The machinery - how it's operationalised
- Fiddling the books
- The market value of children
- market logics
- Class reproduction
- Exclusion as a political choice
- Structural harm + violence
- Stress by design
- Neo liberalism limits humanity
- Materials or values?
- Conditional exclusion

The blueprint - the foundation
- Colonial logics
- Ghosts of Eugenics
- The spectrum of capitalism in schooling
- Carceral logics in education
- Historical influences
- Exclusion as a product of society

Cracks in the system
- Developing Critical consciousness
- Transformation v reform
- De-schooling society
- Don't ask too many questions
- Prefigurative models as inspiration

Love, care + Radical Education
- Love + care as political choices
- Running toward with open arms
- Pedagogy as constraining
- Pedagogy as liberating
- Seeing humanity in abundance
- Collectivism as the an
- Psychological health of education

Appendix L Initial Thematic Structure

The Control Board
(the myths that justify exclusion)

- The myth of opportunity- education as a fair system
  - Meritocratic lies
  - The illusion of choice
  - Who gets to opt out?
- The myth of neutrality (the lies they tell us)
  - Resting on your comfort fantasies
- The myth of adult supremacy
- The myth of the individual
  - Individualised Narratives
  - Structures beyond the individual

The Factory Blueprint
(how historical and societal influences are embedded)

- Capitalism as a structuring force in education
- Historical influences
  - Colonial logics
  - The Ghost of Eugenics
- Carceral logics
- Exclusion as a product of society

The Machinery
(how exclusion is operationalised)

- Market logics in education
  - The market value of children
  - Fiddling the books
  - Neoliberalism as limiting humanity
- Limiting structures
  - Exclusion as a political choice
  - Stress by design
  - Structural harm and violence
  - Conditional inclusion
- Materials or Values?

Short Circuiting the System
(How exclusion is questioned and challenged)

- Questioning school as we know it
  - Prefigurative models
  - Deschooling society
- Disrupting the hegemony
  - Don't ask too many questions
  - Critical consciousness
- Transformation versus reform

Flourishing beyond the machine
(Education as love, care and radical inclusion)

- Liberating learning
  - Pedagogy as limiting
  - Pedagogy as liberating
- From scarcity to abundance
  - Seeing humanity in abundance
  - Psychological health of education
- Love and Care as political choices
  - Collectivism as the antidote
  - Running toward with open arms

Appendix M- Letter of Ethical Approval from the Tavistock Research and Ethics Committee

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699

https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Christie Ghent

By Email

10 May 2024

Dear Christie,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: *'A socio-political critique of school exclusions in the United Kingdom. Exploring radical and non-reformist alternatives to exclusionary practice.'*

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.
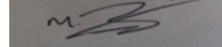
If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Franklyn

Academic Governance and Quality Officer
T: 020 938 2699
E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc.   Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

Appendix N- Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

This information is being shared with you because I am seeking your consent to participate in the study outlined in the participant information sheet.

Title: A socio-political critique of school exclusion in the United Kingdom. Exploring radical and non-reformist alternatives to exclusionary practice.

Who is doing the research?

My name is Christie Ghent. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist in my second year of studying for the Professional Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology. I am carrying out this research as part of my course.

Who has given permission for this research?

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust has given ethical approval to carry out the research.

If you agree to take part in this research, please tick and sign the sections below and return this form to Christie Ghent via email (cghent@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Participant

Name:……………………………………………………………………………………

………………………

Participant pseudonym for this research

project:……………………………………………………………….

Name of organisation (as related to school

exclusions/activism):……………………………………………………………………

…………………………………..

1) I have read and understood the information sheet, have been given a copy to keep, and have had the chance to ask questions.	
2) I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary I am free to withdraw from the focus group at any time without giving a reason and that any data related to my involvement to the project will be destroyed.	
3) I understand that after the completion of the focus groups, I will be unable to withdraw my data. However, I understand that I can request for my data not to be quoted when the study is reported, without giving a reason.	
4) I agree for the group discussion to be recorded during the focus groups. If the research is to take place online, I will be required to agree to the conditions of the software in terms of	

privacy, data storage and collection by the software company.	
5) I understand that my data will be anonymised and identifying data will be anonymised (names, locations) so that I cannot be linked to the data. I understand the small sample size and nature of the focus group means there are some limitations to the information provided remaining anonymous.	
6) I understand all data will be kept confidential by the researcher and stored securely, unless there are safeguarding concerns around imminent harm to self and/or others or there is a legal requirement to disclose information.	
7) I understand that my contributions to the focus group will be used for this research and cannot be accessed for other purposes.	
8) I understand that the findings from this research will be published in a thesis and potentially in a presentation or peer reviewed journal.	
9) I am willing to participate in this research.	

Your name (BLOCK CAPITALS):

Signed:

Date:

Researchers name: CHRISTIE GHENT

Signed:

Date:

Thank you for your help

Appendix O- Final Reflective Entry

I maintained a reflective diary throughout the research to document personal and professional insights, emotional responses, and evolving thoughts around school exclusion. This research was initially driven by a sense of frustration and anger toward education systems I perceived as structurally unjust. At the outset, my critical stance often veered toward pessimism, constraining my ability to imagine alternative futures or locate my professional practice within transformative possibilities. However, as I engaged with participants' accounts, particularly their imaginative reconstructions and prefigurative visions, I began to notice glimmers of resistance that I could translate into my own practice. These moments of hope prompted a reorientation in my thinking, shifting me from a position of constrained critique toward one grounded in imagination, care, and collective possibility.

This process has invited reflection on my professional role as an educational psychologist. I became increasingly aware of how my work, particularly with secondary-aged students, had often been oriented around employability, a framing that risks reinforcing neoliberal logics of productivity and worth. In response, I began to reframe the kinds of conversations I facilitated with young people. What makes you feel valued? What conditions support you to feel genuinely included within school and the wider community? How do we co-construct spaces where young people genuinely experience their lives and voices as mattering? These questions feel more aligned with the emancipatory orientation of this thesis and mark a shift in how I view inclusion, care, and purpose in education.

A key tension emerged in my initial scepticism toward home education and alternative learning spaces. Early in the research, I noticed myself reproducing

dominant professional assumptions, viewing these spaces as lacking in rigour or structure. Over time, however, I came to see their prefigurative potential more clearly. These were not simply spaces of withdrawal, but sites of relational pedagogy, resistance, and imaginative possibility. Recognising this required me to interrogate my own internalised norms around what constitutes "legitimate" educational practice, and to confront the limitations of dominant discourses within our profession.

The research also deepened my engagement with community psychology and liberation psychology, both of which offered frameworks through which to locate hope and action in contexts of constraint. Previously, I often felt disempowered by the perceived limits of practice within Local Authority systems. However, exploring liberationist and participatory methodologies helped me reimagine the role of the psychologist not as a neutral problem-solver, but as a collaborator, facilitator, and potential accomplice in movements for justice. These frameworks illuminated new routes for practice, through critical consciousness raising, community-based intervention, and shared resistance, even when institutional pathways feel blocked.

This reflexive process reaffirmed how profoundly professional identity is shaped by institutional power, but also how those dynamics can be negotiated through what Freire (1973) terms critical hope. I came to see that transformative work can begin at the level of the relational and the everyday, not through depoliticised acts of "support," but through encounters that affirm dignity, nurture consciousness, and reimagine possibility. At times, I found it difficult to envision radically different futures, not due to a lack of belief in their necessity, but because my thinking was continually pulled back by the force of dominant institutional logics. A struggle which perhaps

echoes the hegemonic constraints explored throughout the thesis. Which further

highlights the political necessity of holding space for imagination, even, and perhaps

especially, when it feels most difficult