

‘DISPOSABLE’ CHILDREN: UNDERSTANDING PRIMARY SCHOOL EXCLUSION
THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS AND PARENTS OF
EXCLUDED CHILDREN IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

By

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Abstract

Research on school exclusion frequently focuses on secondary schools, often connecting exclusionary discipline to the quasi-marketisation of schooling and demands for continuous improvement. Recognising that primary schools also contend with policies of marketisation, this project explores the practice of exclusion from primary schools in the West Midlands. It investigates the purpose that exclusionary discipline serves, how children are made vulnerable to exclusionary practices, and what inclusion looks like following the Covid-19 pandemic which negatively impacted time and resource availability. Through interviews with nineteen education professionals and five parents of excluded children, and the conceptual frameworks of 'childism' (discrimination against children) and an 'ethics of care', this thesis examines the values that uphold exclusionary discipline, demonstrating that the capacity to care for children in mainstream primary schools, and to meet their needs, has been eroded by an approach to schooling that is centred around the promotion of neoliberal capitalist values which encourage the implementation of childist policies and practices. As such, the thesis demonstrates that by viewing children through this transactional, human-capital based lens the most vulnerable children, including those at the intersections of minoritization and disadvantage are not only excluded but positioned as disposable and less deserving of care

Dedication

For all of the children, parents and educators failed by the English school system.

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Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Overview of school exclusion	1
1.2 Research Context	4
1.3 Focus and scope of the project.....	10
1.4 Research questions and objectives.....	15
1.5 Overview of thesis structure	16
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	18
2.1 Introduction	18
2.2 Disproportionalities in the use of exclusionary discipline.....	19
2.2.1 SEND and Mental Health.....	19
2.2.2 Ethnicity	23
2.2.3 Free School Meal Eligibility and Experience of the Social Care System...	26
2.2.4 Gender	28
2.3 How has exclusionary practice come to be accepted in primary schools?	30
2.3.1 Behaviourism in English Schooling.....	30
2.3.2 Trauma Informed Practice	35
2.3.3 Quasi-markets and perverse incentives to exclude	37
2.4 Rights-based perspectives on inclusion and exclusion	48
2.4.1 Children's Rights as Protection from Exclusion	48
2.4.2 Critical Perspectives on Inclusive Education.....	52
2.5 Conclusion	58
3. RESEARCH METHODS	61
3.1 Introduction	61
3.2 Research Design	61
3.2.1 Research Approach	61
3.2.2 Sampling Strategy.....	64
3.2.3 Data Collection	68
3.2.4 Data Analysis	75
3.3 Ethics	81
3.4 Methodological Limitations	83
3.5 Conclusion	85

4.	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	86
4.1	Introduction	86
4.2	An ethics of care: theorising care	87
4.2.1	Care and Caring Under Neoliberal Capitalism.....	91
4.2.2	Problematizing time within capacities to care	94
4.2.3	Applying theories of care to schooling	98
4.2.4	What happens to care when there is a focus on school performance? ..	103
4.3	Childism	106
4.3.1	Childism is a form of prejudice	106
4.3.2	Personal, systemic and state level childism.....	108
4.3.3	Intersectional understandings of childism	110
4.4	Subjectivity and Subjectification in the School	112
4.5	Conclusion	118
5.	EXCLUSION AS AN EXAMPLE OF INTERSECTIONAL CHILDISM	119
5.1	Introduction	119
5.2	A legacy of behaviourism	119
5.3	The intersection of ableism and childism	122
5.4	Illegally excluding children with SEND	131
5.5	Gendered interpretations of, and responses to, behaviour.....	136
5.6	The vulnerability of children from poor families	142
5.7	Social care experienced children: the inescapable vulnerability to exclusion 148	
5.8	Intersectional discrimination against Black and racially minoritised children 152	
5.9	The hidden curriculum of exclusion	159
5.10	Conclusion	163
6.	THE POLITICS OF CARE AND CARING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS	165
6.1	Introduction	165
6.2	Caring in a transactional school system	165
6.3	Legitimising care	169
6.4	Exclusion to maintain ‘standards’	175
6.5	Safeguarding the ‘Other 29’	180
6.6	Meritocratic conceptualisations of care	186

6.7	'Bad' mothers and their 'bad' children	194
6.8	Compassion fatigue and the impossibility of relational care	199
6.9	Conclusion	203
7.	THE VIOLENCE OF CO-OPTATION: CARE AND CARING IN A MARKET FOCUSED SCHOOL SYSTEM	205
7.1	Introduction	205
7.2	'Care' in a performance focused school	206
7.3	Balancing time for pastoral care and meeting the needs of the market	212
7.4	Creating a culture of 'good' behaviour	222
7.5	Trauma informed practice in a deficit focused policy culture.....	230
7.6	Resisting the use of exclusionary discipline	235
7.7	Conclusion	243
8.	CONCLUSION.....	245
8.1	Introduction	245
8.2	Creating disposable children.....	246
8.3	School exclusion and the absence of care.....	255
8.4	Reflections on the research project	262
8.5	Implications for policy and practice	266
8.6	Limitations of the research.....	271
8.7	In closing	272
9.	REFERENCE LIST	274
10.	APPENDIX	300
A.	Ethics Approval.....	300
B.	Information Sheet	301
C.	Consent Form.....	304
D.	Interview Schedule (Education Professional)	306
E.	Interview Schedule (Parent)	308
F.	Participant Profiles.....	310
G.	Thematic Analysis Maps	313

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Incidences of permanent exclusions at primary schools in England and the West Midlands between 2012/13-2022/23 (DfE, 2024b) 5

Figure 2- Incidences of suspension at primary schools in England and the West Midlands between 2012/13 - 2022/23 (DfE, 2024b) 6

Figure 3 - Primary school Permanent Exclusion and Suspension rate by pupil characteristic in 2022/23 for England and West Midlands(DfE, 2024b) 7

Figure 4 - Reasons for permanent exclusion and suspension in primary schools in the West Midlands (by percentage) for 2022/23 academic year (DfE, 2024b) 9

Figure 5 - Example post in a Facebook group 67

List of Acronyms

SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
FSM	Free School Meals
SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of school exclusion

School exclusion describes the practice of removing a child from the classroom and/or school. There are many synonyms for this practice including; suspension, expulsion, internal exclusion, expel, fixed-term exclusion, permanent exclusion and indefinite exclusion¹. In this thesis, I examine the practice of school exclusion in primary schools in the West Midlands, England. For clarity, I draw my definition of exclusion from the most recent Department for Education (DfE, 2024a) guidance. In the DfE guidance document it is noted that a ‘suspension’ describes the practice of temporarily removing a child from the school and a ‘permanent exclusion’ is where a child is no longer allowed to attend the setting from which they were permanently excluded. The guidance (ibid.) stipulates that suspensions should be used as part of a school’s behaviour policy and to ensure that children are aware of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour. A permanent exclusion is only declared lawful where a child has seriously or persistently breached the school’s behaviour policy and where their continued presence in the school may result in harm to the welfare or education of the child themselves or others in the setting. Furthermore, according to the DfE statutory exclusion guidance (DfE, 2024a) when making the decision to exclude a child from school, headteachers have a duty to consider the principles of administrative law and therefore, they must be certain that their decision is “lawful...,reasonable, fair and proportionate” (DfE, 2024a:11). With respect for ensuring their decision is lawful, headteachers must have due regard for the Education Act 2011,

¹ ‘indefinite exclusions’ were categorised in 1986 and outlawed with the 1993 Education Act (Kinder, et al., 1999)

the European Convention of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1952), the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Equality Act 2010, where a pupil with special educational needs (SEN) is concerned, the decision to exclude must comply with the SEN Code of Practice (2015).

Despite the existence of such guidance, many children are illegally excluded from school or 'off-rolled'. The DfE (2022) published guidance explaining that school leaders should consider the following actions to be off-rolling and therefore, unlawful; coerced home education, coerced school movement, sending a pupil home to 'cool off' without formally recording this as an exclusion, excluding a pupil due to the schools' inability to meet their additional needs, and excluding a pupil due to their academic attainment or failure to meet reinstatement conditions (ibid.). It is necessary to note that children can also be 'internally excluded', this is a practice whereby a child is removed from the classroom for a defined period but remains within the school grounds. The use of this practice is at the discretion of school leaders and therefore looks different and is referred to by various names at different schools. At the outset of this project I intended to focus on 'formal' exclusions such as suspensions and permanent exclusions. However, upon interviewing my participants it became clear that it was necessary for me to widen my scope and also take account of illegal exclusionary practices. Therefore, in this thesis, unless a particular type of exclusion is specified e.g. permanent exclusion, suspension or illegal exclusion, it should be assumed that where the term 'exclusion' is used I am referring to general exclusionary practices that occur within schools and position children as 'outsiders'.

Academic research on school exclusions and public debate regarding this practice has been ongoing for decades, with an uptick in research and publications on primary school

exclusion correlating with increases in the use of this disciplinary mechanism. In the 1990s, Hayden (1997) conducted ground-breaking research on primary school exclusion use, implicating ‘within-child’ characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, level of economic deprivation and SEN diagnosis into a Venn diagram of risk factors that render children more vulnerable to primary school exclusion. She also implicated ‘home factors’ such as family breakdown and involvement with social services, and ‘school factors’ such as budget reductions and staffing problems within this matrix of vulnerability. Conducting research at a similar time, Pavey and Visser (2004) found that official statistics on exclusion use were largely unreliable and incomplete. Yet their interviews with headteachers indicated that school ethos, including ridged behaviour policies and an unwillingness to adapt to the individual needs of children were key contributing factors to more frequent exclusion use. More recently, the ‘Excluded Lives’ team at the University of Oxford have been producing further insight into this practice. While their research predominantly focuses on the secondary school, it has shown that a loss of local authority powers, reduced funding for support services and a focus on accountability measures over the inclusion of children with SEN and/or Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties all contribute to the use of exclusionary discipline in primary and secondary schools across the United Kingdom (Cole, et al., 2019; Daniels, et al., 2019; Thompson, et al., 2021).

Further, recent research and analysis has evidenced the potential harms of being exposed to exclusionary disciplinary processes at the primary school level. In a longitudinal analysis of school exclusion data, Thompson (2022) tracked the likelihood of exclusion for two cohorts of pupils in England. His analysis revealed that experiencing a

permanent exclusion or suspension at primary school was a common precursor to later exclusions and suspensions in the child's school career. In fact, Thompson's (2022) analysis shows that where children were excluded in Year 1, 84% went on to have a subsequent exclusion during their school career, 53% of those exclusions occurred at secondary school. Unsurprisingly, experiencing exclusion from school has also been shown to negatively impact education outcomes. A recent analysis of the national pupil database has shown that children who are permanently excluded from primary school are significantly less likely to pass GCSE English and Maths than children who are suspended or have never been excluded. This was the case even where pupil characteristics were controlled for (Beynon, 2024). Furthermore, research from the US has demonstrated that being suspended from school before the age of 12 is associated with greater increases in arrest during adulthood, particularly for Black and Hispanic children (Novak, 2022). Back in the UK, the Commission on Young Lives (2022) published a detailed research report in which they highlighted the disproportionate use of exclusion amongst 'vulnerable' groups of children and young people in England; recognising the harm caused by this, they subsequently called for an end to primary school exclusion use. Calls to end exclusion use have also been voiced by the DfE's mental health tsar (Speck, 2021) the West Midlands Combined Authority and Police and Crime Commissioner (2021), as well as grass-roots organisations such as 'No More Exclusions' (Musa, 2022).

1.2 Research Context

Every year the Department for Education publishes data on the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions issued across England, this data is broken down by school level, geography and pupil characteristics but does not contain intersectional data.

Despite this, the data available does make it possible to identify trends in exclusionary practices. The most recent data from the DfE (2024b) documents record numbers of permanent exclusion and suspension; there were 786,961 suspensions and 9,376 permanent exclusions issued across all state-maintained schools in England in the 2022/23 academic year.

When primary school level exclusions are solely examined, it is possible to observe the number of officially recorded permanent exclusions reaching almost record highs (DfE, 2024b), with the number of permanent exclusions in West Midlands primary schools increasing by 63 between the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years.

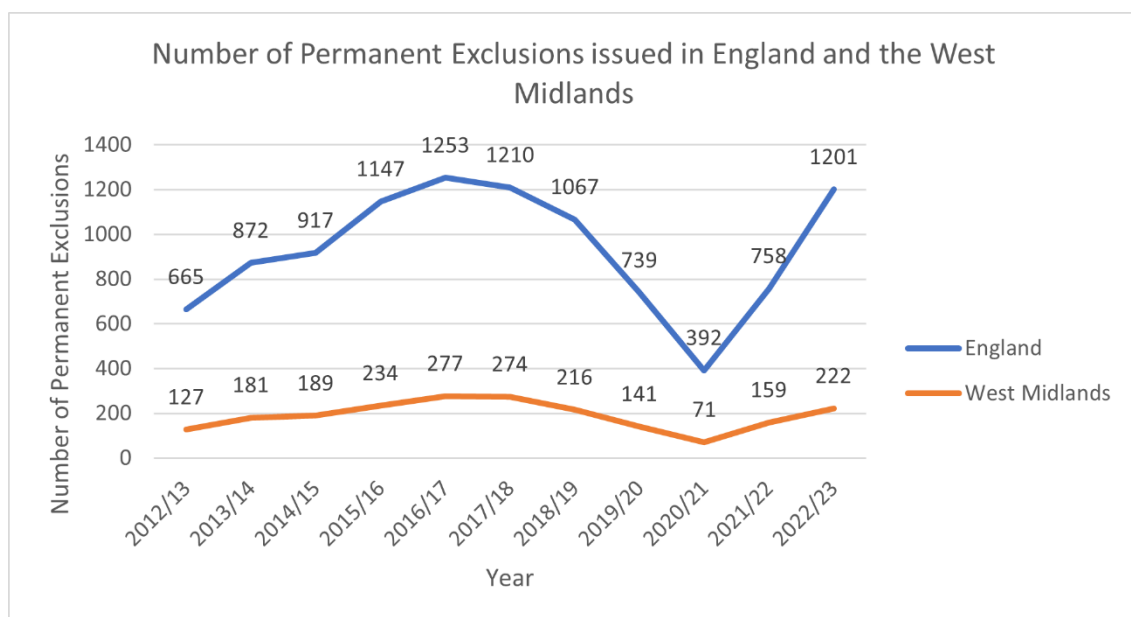


Figure 1 – Incidences of permanent exclusions at primary schools in England and the West Midlands between 2012/13-2022/23 (DfE, 2024b)

Similar trends can be observed in the use of suspensions, with 1,588 more suspensions being issued in West Midlands primary schools in 2022/23 than in 2021/22 (DfE, 2024b).

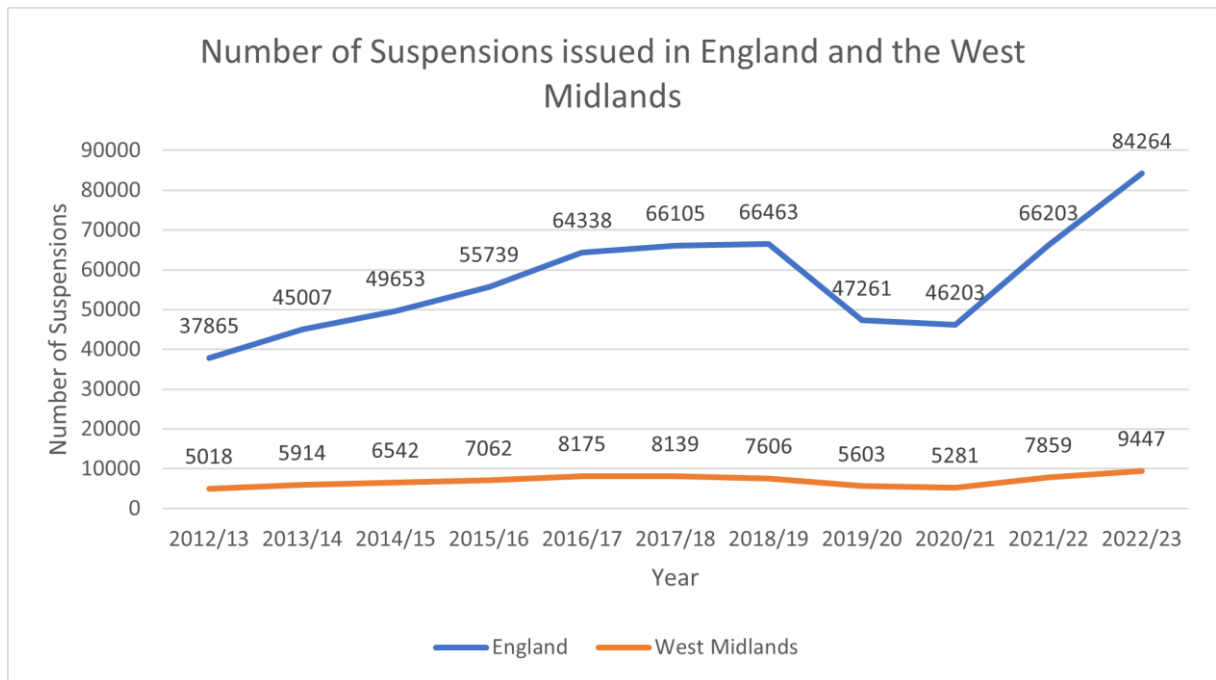


Figure 2- Incidences of Suspensions at primary schools in England and the West Midlands between 2012/13 - 2022/23 (DfE, 2024b)

Importantly, this official data provides some insight into which children are particularly vulnerable to exclusion; such information is provided by data pertaining to exclusion rates. An exclusion rate allows trends in exclusion data to be identified by presenting the number of children excluded per 100 children in a given academic year. The permanent exclusion and suspension rates for children in primary schools across England and the West Midlands, by pupil characteristic, are displayed in Figure 3. The data shows that in the 2022/23 academic year, children eligible for free school meals, children with identified SEN, children with identified SEN and an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), boys, children from Black Caribbean, Gypsy Roma, Irish Traveller, white and Black African and white and Black Caribbean backgrounds were all disproportionately permanently excluded and suspended from primary schools in England and the West Midlands. In [chapter 2](#), I outline academic research that has focused on exploring

disproportionalities in school exclusion use, examining this particular issue in more detail.

Characteristic	Eng. PEX rate	WM PEX rate	Eng. Sus. Rate	WM Sus. Rate
Any other Asian background	0.01	0.00	0.47	0.51
Any other Mixed background	0.03	0.05	1.74	2.05
Any other black background	0.02	0.00	2.02	2.71
Any other white background	0.01	0.03	0.94	1.12
Bangladeshi	0	0.01	0.32	0.23
Black African	0.01	0.03	1.29	1.34
Black Caribbean	0.04	0.17	3.48	4.72
Chinese	0	0.00	0.20	0.35
Gypsy Roma	0.08	0.20	5.01	3.48
Indian	0	0.01	0.20	0.29
Irish	0.03	0.00	1.88	1.88
Pakistani	0.01	0.01	0.50	0.68
Traveller of Irish heritage	0.13	0.25	8.73	4.47
White British	0.03	0.05	2.18	2.17
White and Asian	0.02	0.07	1.04	1.92
White and Black African	0.04	0.09	2.34	2.5
White and Black Caribbean	0.05	0.09	4.02	3.44
FSM - Eligible	0.07	0.10	4.43	3.91
FSM - Not eligible	0.01	0.02	0.99	0.98
SEN provision - No SEN provision	0	0.01	0.42	0.47
SEN provision - SEN with statement or EHC	0.2	0.30	16.40	18.83
SEN provision - SEN without statement	0.13	0.22	7.73	7.39
Male	0.04	0.07	3.01	3.04
Female	0.01	0.01	0.57	0.54

Figure 3 - Primary school Permanent Exclusion and Suspension rate by pupil characteristic in 2022/23 for England and West Midlands(DfE, 2024b)

In addition to this, when a child is excluded from school, the school has a duty to inform the Department for Education about the reason for this exclusion. In an attempt to standardise and streamline the process, the DfE ask that schools attribute the exclusion to up to three of sixteen pre-established reasons, including; abuse against sexual

orientation or gender identity, abuse relating to a disability, bullying, damage, drug and alcohol related, inappropriate use of social media or online technology, persistent disruptive behaviour, physical assault against a pupil, physical assault against an adult, racist abuse, sexual misconduct, theft, use or threat of use of an offensive weapon or prohibited item, verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against a pupil, verbal or threatening abuse against an adult, and wilful and repeated transgression of protective measures in place to protect public health (DfE, 2024b)

The most recent statistics taken from the 2022/23 academic year (DfE, 2024b) show that at primary schools in the West Midlands, persistent disruptive behaviour was the most common reason for permanent exclusion (28.7%), followed by physical assault against an adult (24.2%) and physical assault against a pupil (18.6%). Similar reasons are commonly given for the use of suspension, with persistent disruptive behaviour (29.6%) occupying the top spot, followed by physical assault against an adult (27.7%) and verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (11.8%).

Reason for exclusion (%age of exclusions issued for given reason)	SUS	PEX
Abuse against sexual orientation and gender identity (%)	0.12	0.24
Abuse relating to disability (%)	0.03	0.00
Bullying (%)	0.68	0.72
Damage (%)	6.76	7.95
Drug and alcohol related (%)	0.31	0.00
Inappropriate use of social media or online technology (%)	0.41	0.48
Other (%)	z	z
Persistent disruptive behaviour (%)	28.73	29.64
Physical assault against a pupil (%)	18.60	11.57
Physical assault against an adult (%)	24.21	27.71
Racist abuse (%)	1.15	0.48
Sexual misconduct (%)	0.57	0.96
Theft (%)	0.12	0.24
Use or threat of use of an offensive weapon or prohibited item (%)	1.34	2.65
Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against a pupil (%)	5.42	5.54
Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (%)	11.17	11.81
Wilful and repeated transgression of protective measures in place to protect public health (%)	0.38	0.00

Figure 4 - Reasons for permanent exclusion and suspension in primary schools in the West Midlands (by percentage) for 2022/23 academic year (DfE, 2024b)

While these statistics provide a degree of insight into the reasons for exclusion from primary school, it is important to treat them with some caution. Vulliamy and Webb (2001) in their paper on the social construction of school exclusion rates, provide an account of why the reliability and validity of official exclusion statistics should be called into question. They argue that as thresholds of misbehaviour are likely to differ between individual schools and headteachers, the category of ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’ may include within it different perceptions of disruptive behaviour depending on the tolerance and behaviour policy of the school. Furthermore, they note that not all exclusions are recorded and therefore, official statistics can only provide us with part of the picture regarding the use of exclusion in schools. While the paper by Vulliamy and Webb (2001) is now just over twenty years old, by using qualitative methods of data

collection and analysis, the present research project demonstrates why their concerns regarding the reliability and validity of official exclusion statistics continue to hold weight; particularly where ‘reasons’ for exclusion use are concerned.

1.3 Focus and scope of the project

As stated, this research project focused on the experiences of people living and working in the West Midlands. The decision was taken to focus on this area as the number and rate of permanent exclusions used at the primary school level has been consistently higher than any other region in England since the 2016/17 academic year. Additionally, the number and rate of suspensions issued has remained high compared to many other regions (DfE, 2024b). Furthermore, the West Midlands has the second highest percentage of primary school children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in England (28.3%), equating to just over 1 in 4 children. It has the third highest number of children attending primary school who speak English as an additional language (DfE, 2024c), the percentage of primary aged children from Black Caribbean backgrounds is second only to that of London (ibid.), and while the West Midlands has the smallest percentage of primary school age children with access to an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (1.9%), it has the second highest percentage of children receiving Special Educational Needs support without an EHCP being in place (14.2%) (DfE, 2023); all are factors that have been shown to increase vulnerability to exclusion. The region has a similar number of academies (811) and local authority maintained primary schools (963). These statistics all serve to demonstrate why locating a study of primary school exclusion within the West

Midlands is a sensible choice, particularly where research is concerned with understanding how exclusion is used for children from traditionally marginalised groups.

This research was conducted in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, while I did not set strict parameters regarding how recent experiences of exclusion should be, all apart from one of the parents I interviewed had their children excluded either shortly before, during or after the Covid-19 lockdowns. All of the education professionals I interviewed had also worked in education prior to, during and after the Covid-19 lockdowns; the vast majority had extensive experience in education and teaching, often spanning decades. One may reasonably expect that during the Covid-19 lockdowns, exclusion use would have dropped close to zero as the vast majority of children were not attending school. However, this was not the case. In fact, between 2019 and 2021 there were 212 permanent exclusions and 10,884 suspensions from primary schools in the West Midlands. It is therefore unsurprising that Ferguson (2021) argues that the UK government failed to protect children's right to education during the pandemic. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, schools were legally required to provide online education to all of their pupils. However, while this legal requirement was enforced, the resources necessary to aid its successful implementation were not equally distributed therefore meaning that many children from economically deprived backgrounds were commonly unable to access a full education during the lockdowns (ibid.). Importantly, children from economically deprived families and therefore eligible for FSM were suspended from primary schools in the West Midlands at 3.5 times the rate of children not eligible for FSM; they were also 3 times more likely to be permanently excluded during the 2020/21 academic year (DfE, 2024b).

Furthermore, the Coronavirus Act 2020 altered the obligations of local authorities when providing education to children with special educational needs. Rather than requiring the LA to use their 'best endeavors' when seeking education that meets the requirements of a child's EHCP, the new legislation mandated that LA's should only need make 'reasonable endeavors'. Both of these examples illustrate how the UK government prioritized children's access to education, particularly for economically deprived children and children with special educational needs during the peak of the pandemic.

While school exclusion has been the focus of much academic research historically and in recent years, the theoretical framework engaged with throughout this thesis has allowed me to provide new insights into this disciplinary practice. By taking inspiration from the work of Lynch (2022) and drawing upon scholarship regarding the ethics of care, particularly within a neoliberal capitalist system, with this project I have been able to expand knowledge of primary school exclusion in such a way that exclusionary practices can be more deeply understood from a systemic and institutional perspective rather than one that focuses upon the individual 'deficits' of the excluded child and/or their family. Foucauldian perspectives and critical policy scholarship are frequently found in research on school exclusion, while these perspectives are valuable, by making use of theories of care I have been able to provide a more nuanced discussion that considers how the capitalist economic system works upon the emotional lives of individuals in society, encouraging and discouraging certain qualities, promoting those that are perceived as contributing to the development of a capitalist economy; namely, individualism, resilience and competition. In doing so, this research demonstrates how important and useful it is to consider exclusionary practices from this broader perspective, shifting the

focus from the traditionally neoliberal concept of individual responsibility and shining a light on the systems and institutions that are manufacturing, and sometimes profiting off, a denial of access to inclusive mainstream education for some children, with potentially life-changing consequences for their families

In addition, this project takes up scholarship on childism, emerging from the fields of psychotherapy and human rights, and applies it in a sociological way to analyse the discrimination against children that is embedded within policies, practices and attitudes regarding the disciplining of children in school. By taking an intersectional perspective that considers the presence of racism, classism, ableism, sexism *and* childism in school practice, policy and pedagogy this research project provides an explanation as to why the views of children are not taken into consideration when significant decisions, such as exclusion, are made about their education futures. This sociological use of the concept of intersectional childism allowed me to deepen my analysis of the systemic discrimination and harm inflicted upon children in the English education system through the process of exclusionary discipline. As such, I consider the importance of this research project to be rooted in its contribution to theoretical knowledges and ways of thinking about how and why exclusion endures as an ‘acceptable’ disciplinary approach despite a wealth of evidence demonstrating the negative and sometimes tragic consequences of such policies.

Furthermore, this research involved the lived experiences of both education professionals and parents of excluded primary school age children, many of whom reflected upon their experience of exclusion during and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is

significant as not only does educational research on exclusion commonly neglect to include the experiences of parents, particularly of primary age children, but up until now few academic studies (with the exception of the Excluded Lives team at the University of Oxford) have taken consideration of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the use of exclusionary discipline in schools. The Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by a significant cost-of-living crisis that continues to impact people's daily lives across the UK, including school children. Despite this, DfE behaviour advisors called for increasingly strict discipline in schools in response to this turbulent social and political time (Bennett, 2020). Concurrently, local and national government officials contributed to the production of harmful narratives about parents of children with SEND, attributing difficulties accessing SEND support to irresponsible parents abusing the system (Nevett, 2023; Whittaker, 2023). Through taking a distinctly sociological approach that not only considers the role of systemic and institutional discrimination against children, but also political and economic ideologies that foreground 'individual responsibility' and competition, this research project contributes to dismantling deficit attitudes towards excluded children and their families. Thus highlighting how sustained increases in exclusion use prior to the pandemic, and a rapid return to the use of exclusionary discipline following Covid-19 related school-closures is not the result of increasingly 'naughty' children, 'demanding' parents or schools that have lost 'control' of the children under their supervision. Rather, exclusion use, particularly disproportionate use against minoritized children, is a systemic and institutional issue fuelled by the deficit discourses that surround children, and the erosion of relational care from the English school system.

1.4 Research questions and objectives

Primary school exclusions are being used on an increasingly frequent basis across England but particularly in the West Midlands. As stated above, recent research has demonstrated the detrimental impact that being excluded from primary school can have on child's educational achievements and future more broadly. Therefore, in this research project I set out to use the knowledge and perspectives offered by care theories and the emerging literature on childism to understand more about why exclusionary discipline has endured as a seemingly essential component of school behaviour policies and in the psyche of education professionals, and the consequences that this has on the lives of excluded children and their families.

As such, this research project contributes to academic knowledge regarding primary school exclusion by answering the following research questions:

1. In a school system that emphasises competition, choice and high-stakes accountability, what purpose does the use of exclusionary discipline serve according to education professionals working in and with primary schools in the West Midlands?
2. What can theories of care and the concept of 'childism' reveal about how children are made vulnerable to exclusion and suspension from primary school in the West Midlands?
3. What can the experiences of parents of excluded children and education professionals reveal about the reality of inclusion in primary schools across the West Midlands, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Semi-structured interviews with education professionals working in and with primary schools across the West Midlands were used to inform the answers to these research questions. I also interviewed parents of children who had been excluded from primary schools in the West Midlands, all but one of the children in question were either diagnosed as autistic, as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and/or Persistent Demand Avoidance (PDA) prior to their exclusion or shortly afterwards. The remaining child was awaiting an assessment for autism at the time of the interview. Having a child with diagnosis of any special educational need or disability was not a pre-condition for inclusion in this project. With the above research questions guiding the focus of this research project, the following research objectives were constructed:

1. Use personal networks, social media and information freely available online to connect with and identify individuals who are willing to be interviewed for the research project and have relevant experience of exclusionary practices in primary schools
2. Conduct semi-structured interviews with the aforementioned participants either online or in-person
3. Transcribe content of semi-structured interviews before using reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the experiences of exclusionary discipline narrated participants

1.5 Overview of thesis structure

This thesis begins with an exploration of key literature on the topic of school exclusion, dedicating attention to the following themes; how exclusionary practices have come to

be accepted as an essential component of schooling, disproportionalities in the use of exclusionary discipline and the effectiveness of rights based perspectives for challenging exclusion use. Due to the dearth of research specifically focusing on exclusions at the primary school level, the literature review also draws upon research conducted in and on secondary school settings. The literature review is followed by a chapter exploring the research methods and data analysis techniques that were used during this project. A chapter on the guiding theoretical framework is then provided, detailing the background, relevance and key contributions of scholarship regarding an ethics of care and childism.

The second half of the thesis sets out and discusses the key findings of this project. I begin with a chapter that is focused on exploring how children are made vulnerable to exclusionary discipline in the primary school setting; this necessarily includes a discussion of childism and intersectionality. This is followed by chapter that is focused on explaining how being positioned as ‘Other’ in the primary school setting can increase vulnerability to exclusion; here, Youdell’s (2006a) concept of ‘impossibility’ is considered within a wider discussion regarding the politics of care and caring in a neoliberal capitalist school system. Finally, I end with a chapter that considers how the marketisation of schooling has altered what it means to care for children in schools, having significant consequences for children and educators. Answers to the research questions, reflections on the research process, a discussion of project limitations and suggestions for further research are provided in the concluding chapter.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

School exclusion is not an under-researched phenomenon and as the statistics outlined in the introduction demonstrate, it is well known that some groups of children are permanently excluded and suspended from primary school at a higher rate than others. Despite this, existing academic research rarely focuses on the use of exclusionary discipline at the primary school level therefore meaning that exclusions occurring at this significant foundational stage of a child's educational, social and emotional development are not understood in sufficient depth. In order to provide this research project with the necessary contextual information, I begin this literature review chapter by examining research conducted on the disproportionate use of school exclusions amongst children with SEN/D, racialized children, children eligible for FSM, boys and children who have experienced the social care system. Attention is then turned to research on the dominance of behaviourist pedagogy, the emergence and usefulness of trauma informed practice (TIP) and the role that the quasi-marketisation of schooling plays in exclusion use. Finally, I consider the role that children's rights literature has played in promoting inclusive education, before engaging with the work of scholars who undertake research that involves a critical questioning of inclusive education. Particularly in the context of segregated schooling, medicalisation, pathologisation and 'Othering'. While every effort was made to prioritise literature pertaining to the primary school setting, due to a lack of research in this particular area, some research focused on secondary education has also been included where it provides a useful contribution to enhancing understanding of why

exclusion is used, the harm that it causes and the social and/or policy environment that underpins this disciplinary approach.

2.2 Disproportionalities in the use of exclusionary discipline

In the [introductory](#) chapter of this thesis, I provided some statistical information from the DfE regarding which children are disproportionately likely to be excluded from primary school in the West Midlands. These figures align closely with the national picture regarding exclusion use at both primary and secondary schools. In this first section of the literature review, I once again draw upon those aforementioned statistics while engaging in a broader examination of literature pertaining to disproportionate exclusion use amongst particular groups of children. This literature is engaged with in an effort to demonstrate the longstanding nature of disproportionate exclusion use. As such, I cite the most recent research in the field alongside relevant older research. This first section of the literature review therefore serves the purpose of providing a contextual background to the present research project, forming the basis of the intersectional examination of vulnerability to exclusion that is presented in [chapter 5](#).

2.2.1 SEND and Mental Health

The largest disproportionalities in school exclusion use can be seen in statistics pertaining to the SEN status of children. Children receiving special educational needs support are suspended from primary schools in the West Midlands at 16 times the rate of children without SEN provision, where the child also has an EHCP in place they are

suspended at 40 times the rate of children without SEN provision. Where permanent exclusions are considered, children with SEN are permanently excluded at 22 times the rate of children without SEN provision, children with SEN and an EHCP are permanently excluded at 30 times the rate of children without any SEN provision (DfE, 2024b). Similar trends are reflected across England, yet research specifically exploring the reason for this disproportionality at the primary school level is not extensive. Despite this, some useful insight is provided by research involving the parents of children with SEND that have been excluded from school (at the primary and secondary level).

Interview research conducted by Parker, et al., (2016) presents exclusion as a complex process involving both legal and illegal practices. For many of the parents interviewed by Parker, et al., (2016) exclusion was inextricably linked to their child's SEN and/or mental health – many parents gave accounts of schools being unable to distinguish between additional needs and 'naughtiness'. Therefore, some parents saw a SEN diagnosis as a 'golden ticket' (ibid. 144) to obtaining additional support for their child. Paradoxically, parents of children with SEN diagnoses and/or EHC statements claimed that the diagnosis had not led to extra support. This theme of misunderstanding behaviour and access needs is picked up by Murphy (2021) where he cites evidence of schools misinterpreting behaviours associated with SEN, mental health and abuse as 'naughty' or defiant. As such, many of the children interviewed by Murphy (ibid.) identified a connection between the school's lack of sensitivity to any additional needs and the behaviour they exhibited, resulting in their exclusion. Furthermore, Murphy (ibid.) found that where learning needs were identified and responded to with additional support, pupils encountered ridicule from their classmates which further encouraged

misbehaviour and truancy – Murphy uses this to claim that there needs to be a greater focus on systemic disability discrimination in education and society more widely. More recently, the Commission on Young Lives (2022) found that parents felt schools were eager to exclude their children, commonly misunderstanding additional needs and/or mental health issues as ‘naughty’ or ‘disruptive’ behaviour. However, a different perspective is offered by Ferguson (2020) who claims that children are often excluded before a SEN diagnosis is given in order for schools to avoid compliance with the additional statutory duties evoked when excluding a child with SEN. Irrespective of this disagreement, it is clear from the literature that exclusion is being inappropriately used in primary and secondary schools in England – with little acceptance or understanding of behaviours exhibited by children, but particularly those with SEND.

Research on the relationship between mental health and exclusion is significantly less developed than research on SEN and exclusion. However, Tejerina-Arreal, et al., (2020) found that for primary school aged children, exclusion from school both preceded and succeeded diagnoses of poor mental health. Unfortunately, due to the timing of Tejerina-Arreal, et al’s., (2020) research, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was not considered. This is an important point of note as recent data has shown that the Covid-19 related school closures had a negative impact upon children’s mental health (NHS Digital, 2021) – concerns have also been raised about the lack of capacity the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) have to respond to this increased demand for support (Glorney and Rhoden, 2021).

Further insights into this disproportionality are provided by Stanforth and Rose (2020). Their mixed-methods secondary school focused research found that teachers were more likely to ask that pupils with SEN were removed from the classroom. This was justified by prioritising the learning of the other children in the class. Their data exposed how some teachers positioned certain pupils as cheeky and disruptive without acknowledging systemic and external issues which may be contributing to their behaviour, or in some cases, the teacher's interpretation of that behaviour.

Importantly, some researchers consider the disproportionate exclusion of SEN children to be linked to changes in education policy. Issues regarding official guidance and legislation were raised by Cole, et al., (2019). Their research found that local authority officers believed the new SEND Code of Practice, published in 2015, had contributed to a decrease in the numbers of children diagnosed as having SEN, they claimed this consequently paved the way for disciplinary rather than supportive approaches towards disengaged learners. Moreover, some of their local authority officers perceived the strict, discipline focused exclusions guidance as being contradictory of the more 'progressive' guidance on mental health and SEND (ibid.), thus obfuscating official guidance and creating confusion amongst education professionals. Further, Daniels, et al., (2019a;2019b) and Thompson, et al., (2021), suggest that the explanation for the disproportionate exclusion of children with SEN can be found in the marketisation of education and difficult financial decisions having to be made by school leaders and the local authority – meaning that children are no longer able to readily access support for any additional educational, behavioural or mental health needs. These specific concerns regarding the marketisation of schooling are picked up and expanded upon later in this

[literature review](#). The literature cited here demonstrates that the relationship between disciplinary exclusion and SEND is a complex one. The present project builds upon this existing research by demonstrating how the discriminatory and deficit attitudes held about children with SEN are born out of systemic and institutional discrimination.

2.2.2 Ethnicity

The ethnic group to which a child belongs also contributes to their likelihood of being excluded from school, sometimes this also intersects with SEN. Coard's (1971) foundational text on this intersectional issue drew attention to the miseducation of Black children, evidencing their disproportionate placement in schools for the 'educationally sub-normal' (ESN) – their parents were inaccurately told that these placements were temporary. Coard's (ibid.) observations allowed him to claim that placing children in ESN schools was driven by discrimination and prejudice on the part of teachers who perceived Black children as possessing low intelligence and being behaviourally disturbed. More recently, Demie (2022) used interview research to argue that institutional racism, poverty, low teacher expectations, poor quality training, and a disproportionately white workforce are the reasons why Black and Global Majority pupils are disproportionately excluded. Additionally, the Commission on Young Lives (2022) suggested that endemic 'adultification' serves to position Black children as angrier and older than their white peers. This, alongside an unrepresentative curriculum which reduces feelings of belonging amongst Black and Global Majority pupils, contributes to their disproportionate exclusion. The report (ibid.) also recommends that greater emphasis should be placed on recruiting teachers, governors and senior leaders from Black and Global Majority backgrounds – noting that the primary school workforce is 90% white.

When discussing how Black and some Global Majority children are disproportionately excluded from school, Demie (2022) and The Commission on Young Lives (2022) are referring to national exclusion statistics regarding secondary schooling. However, these disproportionalities also exist in West Midlands's primary schools. DfE (2024b) data shows that Black Caribbean children are suspended at 2 times the rate of white British children, Gypsy Roma children are suspended at 1.6 times the rate of white British children and children of Irish Traveller heritage are suspended at 2 times the rate of white British. Where permanent exclusions are considered, the disproportionate rates of exclusion are even more stark. Children from Black Caribbean backgrounds are excluded at 3.4 times the rate of white British children, children from Gypsy Roma backgrounds are excluded at 4 times the rate of white British children and for children of Irish Traveller heritage, they are permanently excluded at 5 times the rate of white British children.

Older research on racism in education and the use of exclusion provides more structural and institutional explanations for the discrimination faced by children in English schools. Christian (2005) claims that while considering and exposing teacher bias is important, focusing too much attention on this fails to expose the white cultural supremacy present in the English education system – particularly its failure to embrace Black pupils. Similar sentiments were expressed by Osler and Hill (1999) who found that while 'colour-blind' approaches to reducing exclusion did succeed in reducing exclusion for all groups, they did not succeed in addressing *disproportionate* rates of exclusion. The authors (ibid.) therefore argue that specific policy initiatives are needed if the disproportionate exclusion of Black pupils is to be curtailed. Such 'colour-blind' approaches to education policy have also been problematised by Gillborn (1997) and Parsons (2009), both authors argue that

the neoliberal values of individualism and meritocracy present in English schools serve to make racist attitudes and practices appear more respectable, “concern with *colour* is replaced with *culture*” (Gillborn, 1997:352. Emphasis in original). As such, there is a willful ignorance on the part of policymakers and educationalists with respect to the presence of racism in education (Gillborn, 1997), this has significant implications for which children are disproportionately exposed to exclusionary discipline. More recently, Kulz (2015) made clear the importance of considering the intersection of race and class when examining educational inequality, particularly in the context of heightened marketisation. Kulz’ (2015:7) research found that educators believed “raced or classed discrimination or middle-class privilege were at least partly to blame for disproportionate exclusion numbers”. However, this intersectional bias and discrimination was obscured by the fact that the school allowed/facilitated some Black children to achieve educational success where they conformed to white middle-classness. As such, it became impossible for parents, pupils or educators to raise concerns regarding racism and classism as inequality in achievement was framed as an issue of individual deficit. Kulz (2017:174) therefore argues that “white middle-classness [is positioned] as normative while other ways of being are designated illegitimate”, therefore rendering children who do not subscribe to this normative way of being particularly vulnerable to exclusion.

Despite this, government commissioned research on school exclusion denies the presence of institutional racism and classism, focusing instead on positioning educational inequalities as the result of individual deficit. The Timpson Review (2019) provides an example of this where it concluded that “the association between ethnicity and exclusion is lower than raw rates suggest. That is to say that other factors associated

with exclusion partially explain the higher rates of exclusion for some groups” (Timpson, 2019:34). A similar view was taken in the ‘Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities’ report (Sewell, et al., 2021) which accompanied the Timpson review in understating the impact that institutional racism has schools. It claimed, “indeed, if there is racial bias within schools or the teaching profession, it has limited effect and other factors such as family structure, cultural aspirations and geography may offset this disadvantage” (Sewell, et al., 2021:69). The quotes above, serve to illustrate how racial disproportionality in exclusion statistics are viewed in education policy circles at present. Furthermore, they confirm Gillborn’s (1997) view that a willful ignorance of issues of race and racism exist within English education policy.

2.2.3 Free School Meal Eligibility and Experience of the Social Care System

DfE (2024b) statistics highlight that children eligible for free school meals (FSM) are disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion². At primary schools in the West Midlands, children eligible for FSM in 2022/23 were permanently excluded at 6 times the rate of children not eligible for free school meals, this figure stood at 4 times the rate of children not eligible for free school meals where suspensions were considered (DfE, 2024b). Hayden’s (1997) work with primary school children provides insight into this relationship – 61% of the excluded primary school children in her case study research were from households with no paid employment. Importantly, research from Parsons, et al., (2001) found that excluded children eligible for FSM were more likely to have poorer educational

² In academic research, FSM eligibility is a commonly used proxy for socio-economic disadvantage (Ilie, et al., 2017)

outcomes regarding attainment and subsequent exclusion in the years immediately succeeding their initial exclusion. More recently, the LA officers involved in Cole, et al's., (2019) research reported observing increased numbers of children living in economically challenging circumstances being excluded from school. Similarly, Partridge (2019) reports that living in poverty is an even stronger predictor of exclusion at the primary level compared to secondary. However, a child's family circumstances alone are not enough to warrant an exclusion from school. Ferguson's (2020) research makes clear that 'vulnerable' children are less likely than those from more affluent backgrounds to have parents with the confidence to challenge a school's decision to exclude – therefore, there are no disincentives for the school. Additionally, Reay (2022) writes that schools serving deprived areas are more likely to adopt stricter behaviour policies that include exclusion use. These schools are also more likely to have high staff turnover, limited resources and an "overreliance on standardised tests" (ibid. p17) – all making inclusion more difficult. Despite this, some research has found that schools serving deprived areas are more inclusive with lower rates of exclusion (Imich, 1994; Gazeley, et al., 2015).

Data from the DfE shows that in 2021/22 children looked after by the LA at any point were suspended from primary school at almost three times the rate of children not looked after by the LA (DfE, 2024a;2024e). Gill, et al., (2017) report that children who are known to social services but remain in the family home face even higher rates of exclusion. Research from Osler, et al., (2001) provided some explanation for this when reporting that headteachers view the 'problem' behaviours of 'looked after' children as being outside of the control of the school because the behaviour did not result from the school environment. In some cases, headteachers believed that the effectiveness of a child's

social worker determined their success in mainstream school (ibid.). Such findings bolster the conclusions of Munn and Lloyd (2005) who claim that the issue of school exclusion extends far beyond the school gates. As such, school level approaches alone cannot reduce the use of exclusion - there needs to also be wider social and economic policies with the aim of addressing poverty.

2.2.4 Gender

Boys have always been overrepresented in DfE exclusion statistics. The most recent figures show that in 2022/23, boys were permanently excluded from West Midlands primary schools at 7 times the rate of girls, this figure stands at 5 times for suspensions (DfE, 2024b). Research has shown that educators often evoke biological constructions when interpreting the behaviour of pupils. As a result, the behaviour of children is policed differently depending upon the child's ability to conform to normative expectations of 'boy' or 'girl' (Lloyd, 2005). Importantly, Carlile's (2009) research found that girls were punished more harshly for exhibiting similar behaviour to boys, especially where that behaviour was sexualised. Collins and Gazeley (2023) found that such biological constructions led to teachers regarding boys as "problematic and inferior" (ibid. p1377) – associating boys behaviour with anger and boisterousness. These views were found to impact upon the pupil's self-perception, sometimes leading to disaffection towards schooling. Notably, research has also shown how gendered interpretations of behaviour are given meaning when they interact with social class and ethnicity, resulting in the adultification of Black girls (Davis, 2022) and Black boys (Davis and Marsh, 2020), as well as low expectations of working-class boys' behaviour and attainment (Jackson, 2003).

More recent research indicates that these enduring biological constructions of acceptable behaviour may be having an impact on how poor mental health in boys is understood. Tejerina-Arreal, et al., (2020) found that for primary school aged boys, poor mental health upon enrolment at primary school was associated with significantly increased risk of exclusion. This was not the case for girls. A partial explanation for this is offered by Hamilton, et al., (2024) who found that 45% of boys in their research felt that they did not get the emotional support they need in school – pointing to a lack of opportunity to discuss emotions with boys in school. Pearson’s (2023) research on masculinity and emotion in education found that boys are often positioned as responsible for their behaviour which provides a degree of legitimisation to disciplinary practices which encourage better decision making and emotion regulation in future. Even where behaviour is medicalised, the responsibility remains upon the young person themselves to abide by the expert medical advice given in order to prevent similar behaviour reoccurring in future. This collection of literature demonstrates how within day-to-day school level interactions, the problematisation of why boys are overrepresented in exclusion statistics is rarely considered, with the identity of ‘boy’ being presented as reason enough.

The literature above demonstrates both the scale of disproportionate exclusion use for certain groups of children and begins to provide some explanations for this. The purpose of this journey through education research concerning disproportionality and school exclusion was to provide a broad foundation upon which to situate the present research project. Having this knowledge of disproportionate exclusion use informed the questions asked to research participants (see [research methods](#)), allowing for an exploration of the

intersectional discrimination experienced by excluded primary school children. Due to the experiences of the research participants, this project draws predominantly upon research concerning the disproportionate exclusion of children with SEND and boys; providing a critique of the use of exclusionary discipline that is ground in a recognition of the institutional and systemic discrimination experienced by children specifically.

2.3 How has exclusionary practice come to be accepted in primary schools?

2.3.1 Behaviourism in English Schooling

Behaviourist approaches towards behaviour management have been, and continue to be, dominant in English schooling. Recommendations for whole school behaviour policies that prioritise the use of rewards and punishments can first be seen in the Elton Report (1989). Throughout the 1990s there was an increased turn to what Dadds (2001) refers to as ‘centralised pedagogy’ – where the Government began instructing schools to adopt specific pedagogies that they believed would enhance academic outcomes and allow the UK to compete on an international scale. Dadds (2001:49) explains that the need to cover so much specific content led to the adoption of a “hurry along curriculum” where the focus was more on teaching than learning. Within this context behaviourism became particularly useful in that it appeared to provide swift, effective solutions to classroom disruption – thus, Dadds (2001:56) argues, the English education system came to be characterised by a “deceptively tidy authoritarianism”. While ‘whole-school’ behaviourist pedagogical approaches have declined in recent years, being replaced by constructivist

and cognitive science informed pedagogy (Payne, 2015), behaviourism continues to be dominant in the realm of behaviour management. Maguire, et al., (2010:156) contend that despite changes in Government, pedagogical and ideological perspectives, behaviour policies and management remain a “key site of policy activity”. The “hurry along curriculum” of the late 1990s is re-framed as “behaviour for learning” by Maguire, et al., (2010:155) where they argue that policy initiatives in schools now commonly focus on how to control children’s behaviour, movements and actions in order to raise achievement levels. Importantly, Maguire, et al., (2010) also suggest that behaviour management has become part of the marketing process of school - a strong behaviour policy is considered to be a ‘selling point’ by parents, especially as behaviour management has become increasingly connected to safeguarding and safety in public consciousness.

A brief look at recent political and policy activity confirms the assertions of Maguire, et al (2010) regarding the positioning of behaviour management as a key policy focus. Between 2010-2021, Nick Gibb, served as the Minister of State for School Standards. His belief was that schools should adopt a traditional approach to teaching and learning accompanied by ‘old-fashioned’ discipline, supporting the crack-down on behaviour including the use of on-the-spot detentions (Williams, 2010). Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu (2017) question ‘discipline’ being used in this way. They argue that in recent years the term discipline has become synonymous with ideas of punishment and control; particularly adults controlling and shaping the behaviour of children. They claim this is problematic as discipline was originally used to describe the “process of gaining knowledge and understanding” (ibid:360). It is important to note that the discipline and punishments

advocated for from the behaviourist perspective do not involve the use of corporal punishment – particularly in a post-Elton Report context. Rather, “physical pain is replaced by emotional loss, to serve the same purpose” (Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu 2017:364). As such, punishments such as ‘time-out’, removal from the classroom, isolation rooms, suspension and permanent exclusion are popular amongst proponents of behaviourism.

Turning to more recent policy work, Mills and Thomson (2022) have written about their experience of contributing to the DfE’s rapid evidence review regarding the use of alternative education provision. In their paper they note that the DfE rejected all notions that school exclusions were being used for reasons other than deliberate defiance of a school behaviour policy, therefore adding credence to the argument that exclusion should always be available for use as a disciplinary tool (Mills and Thomson, 2022). Such a stance has allowed the DfE to position the pupil as the ‘problem’ in every instance of exclusion use while aligning with the position of the 2019 Conservative party manifesto

“We will back heads and teachers on discipline. We will expand our programme to help schools with the worst behaviour learn from the best – and back heads to use exclusions.” (Original emphasis, Conservative Party, 2019:13)

The ‘programme’ referenced in the manifesto refers to ‘behaviour hubs’, a £10 million mentoring programme with the aim of advising school leaders and classroom teachers on how to maintain order and instil discipline in their schools (Carr, 2021). The programme is being led by Government behaviour advisor, Tom Bennett. Bennett’s voice is undoubtedly influential at the DfE, particularly in conversations regarding children’s behaviour (Gillborn, et al., 2022). Bennett (2018a) is a known proponent of behaviourism

who argues that exclusion is a necessary disciplinary tool for schools that makes inclusion more meaningful. In 2018, the Education Select Committee published a report examining the use of alternative provision. In doing so, they branded the increasing use of exclusionary discipline as ‘scandalous’, recommending that schools should champion inclusion and avoid rushing into decisions regarding exclusion. Alongside this, the report recognised the woeful lack of information regarding exclusion use and called for greater rights for excluded children and their parents (Education Select Committee, 2018). Shortly after its publication, Bennett (2018b) described the report as ‘misguided’ and a ‘beautiful satire’ that would, if the recommendations were implemented, make the lives of many children and teachers worse. In the same blog post, Bennett (ibid.) expressed the view that exclusion is necessary for a number of reasons, including: to protect other students from the behaviour of the excluded pupil; to protect staff from the excluded pupil, and; to ensure the excluded pupil has their needs met outside of mainstream education. He further argued that while schools should aim not to exclude pupils, the statistics indicate that exclusion only affects a minority of pupils and therefore is not a cause for concern. Moreover, his blog post also makes clear that he does not believe disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline exists, positing that if pupils with SEND are more likely to misbehave then they are therefore more likely to be excluded – he argues that this should not be considered discrimination as by excluding the pupil the rest of the school population are protected from potential and/or actual harm (Bennett, 2018b).

These views regarding exclusion use can be seen reflected in the most recent iteration of the Department for Education behaviour in schools guidance (DfE, 2024c). The

relationship between the DfE and behaviourism is perhaps most evident in the following extract;

“Maintaining a positive culture requires constant work and schools should positively reinforce the behaviour which reflects the values of the school and prepares pupils to engage in their learning. Sometimes a pupil’s behaviour will be unacceptable, and pupils need to understand that there are consequences for their behaviour. Often this will involve the use of reasonable and proportionate sanctions” (DfE, 2024c:15)

Such a claim speaks to the fundamental principles of behaviourism as outlined by Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu (2017) above. This longstanding faithfulness to behaviourist approaches to behaviour management implies effectiveness. However, research suggests otherwise. Lepper, et al., (1973) and Pritchard (2014) found that where children are provided with rewards for exhibiting ‘desirable’ behaviours, the intrinsic motivation for behaving in this way declined and instances of ‘poor’ behaviour increased. Similarly, Lake (2004) argues that behaviourist approaches cause poor behaviour as they originate from a desire to control children. This lowers self-esteem in children and encourages feelings of powerlessness - “the act of controlling children is the act of oppressing children” (Lake 2004:571). More specifically, recent research conducted in the United States of America indicates that exclusionary discipline is ineffective and even, harmful. Multiple studies have found that exclusionary discipline negatively impacts the educational outcomes of the excluded child and increases the likelihood of persistent absence (Noltemeyer, et al., 2015; LaCoe and Steinburg, 2019; LiCalsi, et al., 2021). Importantly, further literature

shows that attending schools that engage in exclusionary discipline has a negative impact on the educational outcomes of the children who are not excluded (Perry and Morris, 2014; LaCoe and Steinburg, 2019; LiCalisi, et al., 2021; Jabbari and Johnson, 2023). Furthermore, Huang and Connell's (2021) research found that even where teachers support the use of zero-tolerance policies, including exclusion and suspension, feelings of safety amongst school staff and pupils are not increased where these practices are engaged with. Finally, research from LiCalisi, et al., (2021) and Jabbari and Johnson (2023) suggests that because low-income and Black children are more likely to attend schools that engage with zero-tolerance and punitive disciplinary techniques, and exclusions have a negative impact on educational achievement and outcomes, these schools are contributing significantly to the class and race disparities in educational outcomes.

2.3.2 Trauma Informed Practice

However, it is too simplistic to claim that behaviourist pedagogy is the only pedagogy engaged with in English schools. Recent years have seen trauma-informed practice (TIP) and pedagogies beginning to gain traction in education (SAMHSA, 2014). Exposure to trauma can have significant impacts upon children. In particular, it can negatively impact school performance, reduce focus and cause interrupted sleep thus impairing a child's ability to learn. Exposure to trauma can also cause physical and emotional distress which may present as impulsive, aggressive or withdrawn behaviour (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). As such, TIP has been hailed as a key to ensuring vulnerable pupils succeed in education. Helping them to overcome the trust issues resulting from strained parent-child relationships and acting as the perfect antithesis to the 'no excuses'

methods of behaviour management encouraged by a government that champions the values of behaviourism (Diamond, 2020).

Recent research has shown TIP to be effective in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline. Donovan, et al., (2019) and Stegelin, et al., (2020) found TIP to be effective in this regard where the entire workforce is trained and encouraged to adopt this pedagogical approach – they also note the importance of using TIP across the whole school rather than employing it as a targeted intervention. Research has also show that TIP helps school staff to more deeply understand behaviour and demonstrate enhanced compassion towards children (Morgan, et al., 2015; Glorney and Rhoden, 2021; Burt, 2022). Despite this, where English policy has devoted attention to the usefulness of TIP for reducing exclusion, recommendations have suggested TIP be used as a targeted intervention rather than underpinning whole-school approaches (Timpson, 2019).

Despite this, Becker-Blease (2017) warns that the individualised nature of TIP increases the potential for it to serve a narrative of victim blaming where initiatives fail to be successful. Such sentiments are repeated by Khasnabis and Goldin (2020:45) who state, “When trauma-informed practice does not work and performance measures continue to plummet, teachers may be held responsible. Teachers, then, are likely to hold children and families responsible.” Khasnabis and Goldin (2020) claim that this is approach is common in an education system that traditionally seeks out the easiest solution to problems, rather than the more complex solution that would interrogate the root of the issue. Furthermore, David (2021) found that many TIP used in schools do not consider cultural differences in expressions of behaviour and trauma. Similarly, Joseph, et al.,

(2020) contend that colour-blind ideology must first be expunged before any attempt at TIP is made as colour-blind ideology is likely to facilitate victim-blaming and uphold disproportionate rates of exclusion. The research presented above demonstrates the need to be cautious when implementing TIP; not because it is not useful, but because it has the potential to perpetuate and reproduce deficit narratives, particularly for minoritized children and their families. In recognising this problem, Khasnabis and Goldin (2020) call for 'systemically trauma informed practice', describing this as "practice that manages prejudicial tendencies and supports educators to unlearn them" (ibid.45). The authors suggest that utilising TIP in this way prevents trauma resulting from systemic inequality from being individualised and weaponized against the children and families that TIP is supposed to be helping. The research presented here has enabled this exploration of primary school exclusion to be ground within the context of the current dominant pedagogy, behaviourism, and its 'antithesis' (Diamond, 2020), trauma-informed practice. In doing so, it is possible to begin building a picture of how children are made vulnerable to exclusion from school .

2.3.3 Quasi-markets and perverse incentives to exclude

In order to fully understand the role and presence of exclusionary discipline in English primary schools, it is important to consider the wider social and political context within which schooling exists. Therefore, this section will examine literature regarding perverse incentives to exclude that, to a large extent, exist due to the education quasi-market. Education quasi-markets are characteristic of neoliberal capitalism in England. My understanding of neoliberal capitalism is informed by Lynch (2022:2) who describes it as

relating to four key aspects of social, cultural and political life: 1) the privatisation of assets; 2) the protection of private property; 3) state endorsement of free market systems, and; 4) institutionalisation of market-based logics and values. The final two in this list are most pertinent to this thesis and the issue of school exclusion. Neoliberalism demands minimal investment in public services and from this perspective education is a tool to assist in the production of ideal, self-reliant, neoliberal citizens. Furthermore, as market-based logics are fundamental to the structuring of neoliberal capitalist society, the performance of public services is monitored and accountability measures are prioritised. This, in theory, eliminates wasteful distribution of resources while ensuring ‘customer’ satisfaction (Lynch, 2022). Achieving and maintaining customer satisfaction is a key component of English schooling. The more parents a school can encourage to enrol their children, the more money as school has which means a greater capacity to invest in resources that help to produce good examination results amongst the school cohort. Thus, the school’s position as a ‘good’ school is asserted and more parents who want their children to have the best chance at academic success are inclined to enrol their children at the institution. Importantly, connected to this idea of ‘customer’ satisfaction is the prioritization of choice and individual freedom. Lynch (2022:2) argues that neoliberal culture and politics is underpinned by “non-relational, self-referential ontology”. These values inform the approach to education and schooling in England education policy and are evoked when the ‘marketisation’ of education is pursued – evidence of this turn to marketised education can be seen in the 1988 Education Reform Act whereby a national curriculum, school league tables and a focus on a parents right to choose where their child attended school were outlined. Despite this, the term ‘quasi-markets’ is often

adopted where education is discussed, the prefix ‘quasi’ is used to illustrate that the education market is not entirely free from state intervention (Chew, 2019). In England, the state provides a significant majority of the funding required for the education system to operate. The production of national education policies and guidance is also a responsibility taken up by the state. Yet providers of education are commonly private businesses, this can be seen in the existence of Academy Trusts and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) – the existence of such businesses is positioned as essential for enabling school choice for parents. In expanding the dominance of school choice within the quasi-market, competition is intensified (Chew, 2019) and perverse incentives to exclude children and young people from school emerge (Partridge, et al., 2020).

Much research into school exclusion focuses on secondary schools. However, some of the earliest and most comprehensive research that implicated the marketisation of education within reasons for the increased use of exclusion at primary school was conducted by Hayden (1997). When presenting her findings, Hayden (1997:13) claimed that “exclusion from school occurs in a complex set of interacting circumstances of which quasi-markets in education are an important feature”. Her research found that the Education Reform Act 1988 with its implementation of a national curriculum, attainment targets, testing and the delegation of budgets to school leaders, when combined with the resource pressures experienced by primary schools, culminated in a perfect storm that make exclusionary discipline more attractive to school leaders who were under pressure to achieve the best results with dwindling resources (Hayden, 1997). Writing at a similar time, Parsons (1996) also devoted attention to the impact quasi-markets were having on primary schools, noting that league tables, the local management of schools and an

increased focus on exam results had deflected schools from their caring and nurturing role. Such claims were corroborated by Osler and Hill (1999) who, in their Birmingham case study research, found that primary school teachers believed, “curriculum pressures and demands for additional record keeping leave them with little time to support a disruptive child or to develop appropriate alternative materials” (Osler and Hill, 1999:46).

Evidence shows that circumstances have not changed with the passage of time. Research conducted in primary schools by Pratt (2016) highlights the focus that education policy places on meritocracy – encouraging the idea that individual pursuits of excellence are available to everyone, but some will put more effort in and be more successful for others, an achievement for which they will be rewarded. Along these lines, Pratt’s (2016) research found that the academic outcomes of children dominate focus in primary schools – not least because of performance related pay policies. As such, Pratt suggests that this way of working encourages competition rather than collaboration between teaching colleagues. While Pratt does not draw the connection between pupil performance and school exclusion explicitly, this is done by Ferguson (2020). In an examination of school ‘drop-out’ and exclusion, Ferguson (2020:14) suggested that “academic results-driven accountability measures push schools and exclusion decision-makers into inappropriate and unnecessary decisions to exclude”. The work of Pratt (2016) and Ferguson (2020) is brought together by Daniels, et al., (2019a:26) who, when writing about the exclusion of children with SEN note, “policy discourse in England has tended to individualise reasons for exclusion rather than develop an understanding rooted in the wider context of education”. They continue by stating that one of these individualising reasons is pupil attainment, or lack thereof. This policy focus on high

attainment and raising standards provides an incentive for schools to exclude children - particularly those with SEN - who are not predicted to attain the highest grades, especially where there is the reassurance that their needs will be met in private sector alternative provision. It is for this reason that Daniels, et al., (2019a) argue that education policy in England cannot seem to encompass both inclusive practice and educational excellence simultaneously.

Another important aspect to the maintenance of education quasi-markets is school reputation (Thompson, et al., 2021). Importantly, according to Connell (2013), for the commodification of education to succeed, exclusion from school is necessary - it serves as a tool to encourage parents to engage in the market. An example of this can be seen in research from Stirling (1993) who found that when time and resources were tight, exclusion was seen as an attractive option to headteachers, especially where the parents of 'non-disruptive' children were threatening to remove their child from the school. The findings of Osler, Watling and Busher (2001) corroborate this. Their interviews revealed that primary school headteachers across England had, despite their better judgement, been excluding children from school due to pressure from the parents of other children in the school. These parents were expressing concern about how the learning disruption, caused by the 'difficult child', would impact their own children's educational success. More recently, Daniels, et al., (2019b) reported that parental opinions of the school's ability to manage behaviour were an important consideration for schools operating within this marketized system. With school leaders acutely aware that parents want to send their children to schools where they will be 'safe' and have ample opportunities for learning. Having disruptive children in class can damage the school's reputation and image

therefore, exclusion use is incentivised. Importantly, the above research demonstrates that a focus on academic outcomes and reducing disruption for the 'other' learners in the classroom leads to children with special educational, social, emotional, behavioural and/or mental health needs being disproportionately excluded from the school or classroom (this will be expanded upon later in this literature review).

The academisation of schooling is another important issue that should be addressed within this discussion of quasi-markets and school exclusion. Interview research from Cole, et al., (2019) found that local authority and third sector officers working in England perceived the situation regarding school exclusion as deteriorating. The participants attributed this, in part, to academy chains adopting a 'zero tolerance' approach to behaviour management. Furthermore, it was noted that academisation had damaged the relationships between local authorities and schools operating outside of local authority control by reducing opportunities for collaborative inclusive practice and appointing headteachers who were more concerned with business than pupil relationships. This reflects earlier research from Gazeley, et al., (2015) who described schools and local authorities as now operating in silos with reduced communication between essential services. They argued that this was leaving vulnerable young people exposed to a lack of alternatives to exclusion and/or support following an exclusion. Research from Machin and Sandi (2018) focused on the connection between academy schools and school exclusion. They wanted to understand whether academies were more likely to strategically exclude pupils in order to boost performance outcomes. While they did not find evidence of this specific practice, they did note that academies were more likely to exclude children. They concluded that a focus on enhancing school performance was not

the primary reason for disproportionately high exclusion use at academy schools rather, it was a direct result of the tendency of pre-2010 academies to implement more strict discipline policies after converting to academy status. Similar findings were reported by Timpson (2019) who also found that converter academies were more likely to exclude than local authority maintained schools, sponsored academies and free schools. However, Timpson suggested the reason for this was that converter academies were often taking over poor performing schools with a history of poor discipline. This journey through three decades of literature on education quasi-markets and school exclusion use has demonstrated the significance of centralised policy and the impact it has on the daily decisions made by school leaders. The conclusions of Parffrey (1994:108) neatly summarise all of the above, “’naughty’ children are bad news in a market economy. No one wants them. They are bad for the image of the school, they are bad for the league tables, they are difficult and time-consuming, they upset and stress the teachers”. At the heart of this discussion of neoliberal capitalism, quasi-marketisation and schooling is the idea, and presence, of individualism. In the contemporary school context, individualism presents in various forms, whether that is the individualising of children’s behaviour through the dominance of behaviourist pedagogy, the persistent and pervasive rhetoric of meritocracy, the distancing of schools from the local community context via academisation, the introduction of performance related pay for teachers, or the demands from disgruntled parents to remove children from schools where they pose a perceived threat to their own child’s education. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, individualism and schooling go hand-in-hand. This thesis, in undertaking a deep engagement with care

ethics, explores this issue in depth when considering how children are made vulnerable to exclusion from primary school.

Furthermore, since the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, schools have faced persistent cuts to real-terms annual budgets. Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that between the 2009/10 and 2019/20 academic years, per pupil spending in schools was cut by 9% in real terms. Moreover, schools in already economically deprived areas were impacted most severely (Sibieta, 2021). This decision to cut funding to public institutions, including schools, demonstrates another facet of neoliberal economic policy. Implementing austerity policies in response to the 2008 economic crash was a political choice that was largely presented as inevitable. The function of this political project was to serve the interests of enhancing capitalist growth while stripping resources from communities (Mattei, 2022). While I acknowledge that austerity is neither new or a product of the neoliberal reforms that began under the Thatcher government, discussing the marketisation of education in relation to austerity policies allows for a more well-rounded discussion of the education policy environment that facilitates and encourages the use of exclusionary discipline. The relevance of considering the financial situation of schools in exclusions-focused research is made clear by Power and Taylor (2020). Their research – focusing on school exclusions in Wales – found that exclusion use was significantly lower than in England. They partly attributed this to the Welsh Government's resistance of a marketised education system. In Wales there are no league tables, grammar schools or academies, and the curriculum is child-centred (ibid.). However, exclusions do still take place. Power and Taylor (ibid.) argue that this is a system failure in that schools do not have access to the necessary

financial resources to enable them to engage in inclusive practice. Research from Martindale (2022) points to specific areas where schools are lacking the resources necessary to engage in inclusive practice; in 2018/19 schools in England had 12,000 fewer teaching assistants and 21,000 fewer teachers, per pupil, than in 2015/16. When applied to the primary school context, these figures represent a reduction of one classroom teacher for every three schools and one teaching assistant for every five schools. Therefore meaning increased class sizes and the prioritization of employing lower qualified teaching assistants over qualified classroom teachers (ibid.). Importantly, research from Daniels, et al., (2019b:10) found evidence of schools “making the financial decision to exclude”. In making this observation, Daniels et al., (2019b) were specifically discussing how mainstream schools were responding to children with special educational needs, noting that such children were more costly to include due to the additional resources they require and therefore, they were being disproportionately excluded. A report from Social Finance (2020) made similar observations. In their report, it was claimed that incentives to exclude were being created where schools did not have the financial resources to access support for children at risk of exclusion. They further noted that thresholds for securing additional support from the local authority for vulnerable children were now so high that many schools, and by extension children, were no longer eligible for additional support. Research from Thompson, et al., (2021) found evidence of a circular problem occurring between schools, the local authority and children – particularly children with identified additional needs. In their paper, Thompson, et al., (ibid.) describe how ‘high needs block’ funding – funding held by the local authority and ringfenced for SEN provision – is being depleted by rising numbers of permanent

exclusions amongst children with SEN or perceived as being in need of specialist provision. As a result, the LA has less funding available to support schools with inclusive practice and meeting needs in mainstream provision. Therefore, children who need additional support are not being provided with it, thus increasing their vulnerability to exclusion. Finally, research from Cole, et al., (2019) draws a broader connection between austerity policies and school exclusion. Their findings reveal that beyond the funding issues that schools are experiencing, the loss of children's centres, early intervention programmes and family support services have also likely contributed to the rise in exclusion use. They further observe that the impact of the loss of these services is likely exacerbated by the fact that, due to rising living costs, many families are now having to ensure that both parents are in work. This impacts upon the amount of time and support children are getting from their parents, another contributing factor to school exclusion risk.

More recently, schools, children and families have also had to contend with the Covid-19 pandemic and its wake. Research conducted early in the pandemic by Daniels, et al., (2020) observed a variety of ways in which vulnerability to exclusion was beginning to present. Difficulty re-engaging with schooling, poor mental health due to isolation and/or bereavement, fear of returning to 'normal' schooling after enjoying increased one-to-one provision in the school or home, and policy changes regarding headteacher's power to exclude where public health measures had been broken were all highlighted as key concerns. Importantly, further research by Daniels, et al., (2023) noted that the pandemic had contributed to the intensification of 'othering' particular children and young people by either highlighting or exacerbating any additional needs and/or vulnerabilities to

exclusion. Despite this, research conducted in English primary schools by Bradbury, et al., (2023) found that many school leaders made the decision to prioritise the well-being and personal welfare of vulnerable children during the Covid-19 lockdowns. This was not necessarily always well thought through and was often constrained by school finances, yet Bradbury, et al., (2023:776) describe this “crisis policy enactment” as a demonstration of how school leaders do have the agency to act differently and outside of expected norms dictated by the high-stakes accountability frameworks explored earlier in this literature review. What is missing from this literature on Covid-19 is a specific focus on how the pandemic impacted the use of, and vulnerability to, exclusionary discipline in primary schools.

By exploring research concerning dominant pedagogies, trauma informed practice, discipline and the quasi-marketisation of schooling, this section of the literature review provides important information regarding the social and political context within which school exclusion takes place. Having discussed disproportionate rates of exclusion amongst certain groups of children in the first section of the literature review, this second section demonstrates that individual and deficit focused explanations for the use of exclusionary discipline are both inadequate and inaccurate. The use of exclusionary discipline is just another cog in the neoliberal machine that seeks to position children as individually responsible for perceived transgressions of school behaviour policies, while simultaneously positioning them as responsible for adapting their behaviour to align with normative expectations. Where conversations about school exclusion dedicate attention to the faults of the individual child, school, teacher or parent, the harm caused by neoliberal capitalism is further invisibilized. Building upon the literature cited here, I

examine this relationship between individualism, harm and school exclusion throughout the findings chapters of this thesis. In the next section of this literature review, research regarding the promotion of individual rights as a protective mechanism against exclusion and for the furthering of inclusive education is explored.

2.4 Rights-based perspectives on inclusion and exclusion

In the final section of this chapter, I examine literature that focuses on rights-based perspectives concerning school exclusion. First outlining the rights children have to education and how they are evoked in conversations surrounding exclusionary practices, before turning to a brief examination of literature pertaining to illegal exclusion. Finally, I present critical research on inclusive education, challenging the idea that inclusive education can be achieved while practices of segregation remain in place. This section focuses specifically on the experiences of children with SEN/D.

2.4.1 Children's Rights as Protection from Exclusion

Two of the most pertinent documents regarding children's rights and education are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 (UNCRPD). The UNCRC was the first time that children's personhood was acknowledged and therefore, the first time children were seen as "full human beings with fundamental rights to dignity, protection and participation" (Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu, 2017:368). Writing from a rights-based perspective, Blyth and Millner (1994), McCluskey, et al., (2015) and Durrant

and Stewart-Tufescu (2017) all suggest that the exclusion of children is largely incompatible with the UNCRC and UNCRPD. McCluskey, et al., (2015) also note that more support is needed for children and families to make them aware of their rights regarding exclusion, particularly surrounding the appeal process. Most pertinent to this thesis, however, is a discussion of the rights of children with SEN/D and exclusionary practice.

All schools in England are legally required to implement inclusive education by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 as well as the Equality Act 2010. Both make discrimination against children on the basis of disability unlawful. The acts also require schools to make reasonable adjustments in order for disabled pupils to be able to fully participate in education. Importantly, these reasonable adjustments should not be made retrospectively, rather, schools should be actively considering how they can accommodate for children's differing needs prior to any needs arising. This legislation is underpinned by the aforementioned UN documents, the UNCRPD and the UNCRC. Article 24 of the UNCPD explicitly enshrines the rights of disabled children with regard to accessing inclusive education and receiving reasonable adjustments to ensure they are able to participate effectively. Furthermore, all schools and local authorities must have regard to the SEN Code of Practice (2015). This document provides statutory guidance on a range of issues pertaining to the support and facilitation of education for children with SEN. Despite this legislation, a UN (2016) committee evaluating implementation of the UNCRPD made an extensive critique of inclusive education in the UK. They cited particular issues with the increasing trend for segregated education facilitated by the use of special schools and expressed concern regarding how equipped the education system was to accommodate diversity, citing a particular issue with the fact that headteachers

were refusing to admit disabled pupils on the basis that they may disrupt the learning of others. Furthermore, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2021) recently declared that progress towards inclusive education in the UK was in regression and as a result, children with SEN/D were continuing to come up against barriers in their pursuit of a full education. In particular, the EHRC (2021) drew attention to the fact that the UK is one of the only signatories of the UNCRPD to exempt itself from Article 24 (2) (a) and (b) – these subsections refer to ensuring that children are not excluded from school on the basis of their disability while also protecting the rights of children to learn in inclusive settings. Relatedly, Adami (2023) notes that while the UNCRC is undoubtedly important for ensuring children's right to education it does not go far enough in terms of protecting children from discrimination inside of the school setting.

This failure to protect children from discrimination inside of the school can be seen reflected clearly in instances of illegal exclusion. As alluded to above, despite the fact that schools are only allowed to exclude children for disciplinary purposes, perverse incentives to exclude and therefore, illegal exclusions, do take place. The DfE (2024a) consider the following actions to be unlawful exclusionary practice: coerced home education; coerced school movement; sending a pupil home to 'cool off' without formally recording this as an exclusion; excluding a pupil due to the schools' inability to meet their additional needs; and, excluding a pupil due to their academic attainment. While there is no quantitative data documenting the use of illegal exclusions at primary schools, Parker, et al., (2016) provide some insight into this issue. Their (ibid.) interviews with parents of excluded primary school children found evidence of, what they term, 'informal exclusions'. These commonly took the form of encouraging absence at key time periods

such as when Ofsted inspections were occurring, implementing unlawful part-time timetables and excluding children from certain subjects. Some insight into the scale of, and reasons for, illegal exclusion at secondary school is given by the Children's Commissioners Office (2017) who found that thousands of secondary schools were engaging in illegal exclusions. According to the report, these were motivated by fear of reputational damage to the school and their attainment data and an inability to meet needs due to lack of funding. The report also recognised that there are no incentives for schools to act differently, especially as many illegal exclusions go 'under the radar' (ibid.). A House of Commons briefing paper by Long and Dancehi (2019) also suggested that illegal exclusions were being used in response to increasing financial pressure on schools and in an attempt to manipulate performance statistics. However, Ferguson (2020) takes a different view in stating that, because the policy wording regarding exclusion is so vague and ambiguous, headteachers are misunderstanding the guidance and using exclusion where it is not legally warranted. Ferguson (ibid.) also warns that where there is pressure to bring down permanent exclusion figures, off-rolling may increase in prevalence. Such concerns are vindicated by Power and Taylor (2020) who claim that illegal exclusion from secondary schools in Wales have increased due to the pressure the Welsh Government has placed upon schools to reduce permanent exclusions. The authors also implicate lack of funding and inadequate access to resources as a key obstacle in preventing the full inclusion of 'difficult' students into mainstream education. Importantly, recent research has also shown that some children are more vulnerable to illegal exclusion. Namely, children eligible for free school meals, children with diagnosed SEN, care experienced children (Bradbury, 2018; Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019), children

from Black ethnic backgrounds (Bei, Knowler and Butt, 2021), and children with social, emotional and mental health problems (Tompson, et al., 2021). It is therefore clear that the limited evidence available on this topic does indicate that the children who are disproportionately vulnerable to legal exclusion are the same children who are disproportionately vulnerable to illegal methods of exclusion.

2.4.2 Critical Perspectives on Inclusive Education

As Adami (2023) makes clear, a focus on children's rights is not enough to protect them from discrimination. In the academic context, inclusion has different definitions depending upon the perspective of the researcher and field within which they are writing. Some consider inclusion to primarily be a policy initiative (Jull, 2009), others view it as something to be strived for in the pursuit of a more democratic society (Echeita, 2016). For Azorin and Ainscow (2020) inclusion is about learning how to live with and learn from difference. However, Graham and Slee (2008) note that 'inclusion' is commonly used to define accepting someone into a pre-existing norm of being and behaving. With the linguistic implication being that children must assimilate into what is already there and has gone before.

This rejection of assimilation is picked up by Ainscow (2020) who asserts that an 'inclusive turn' should be actively developed in mainstream schools as inclusive education and pedagogy benefits all children in the classroom, while also contributing to the development of a society that is more accepting of difference. Ainscow (2020) also claims that investing in inclusive education in mainstream settings is more economically

sensible than financing segregated special education schools. Earlier work from Ainscow, et al., (2006) establishes priorities for schools where the aim is to meaningfully implement inclusive education. Firstly, they (ibid.) state that inclusive education must continuously respond to the changing needs of pupils in a way that considers difference between individuals to be a positive. Secondly, there must be a constant identification and removal of barriers to inclusion. Thirdly, the school must be concerned with the learning outcomes, attendance and participatory experiences of all children. Finally, schools have a moral responsibility to monitor pupils who are at greater risk of exclusion, underachievement or marginalisation.

Despite the attention inclusive education has received in policy and its reported benefits in terms of equality and educational success (Schuelka, 2018; Mezzanotte, 2022), barriers to implementation remain. Research conducted across multiple country contexts has found teachers to be unsure of their competency in supporting disabled children in the mainstream classroom, with many requesting a preference to hire in professional help or utilise special education schools (Forlin, et al., 2008; Saloviita and Schaffus, 2016). This perceived competency has not been shown to improve with the length of time spent in education, and so inclusive education endures as a ‘specialised’ practice (Varcoe and Boyle, 2014). Policy itself can also be a barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education. Research from Kim, et al. (2022) found that inclusive education can be even more difficult to implement where policy places an emphasis on integration – this is because it requires educators to think differently, overstepping policy boundaries. Additionally, Haynes (2005) notes that where exclusion is driven by a policy focus on outcomes, the exclusion of a child is justified as being in

their best interests. Göransson, et al. (2022) further this argument, stating that the goals of inclusive education have been pushed out by a focus on attainment and the view of education as a 'private good'.

Taking issue with the school effectiveness rhetoric that commonly occupies education policy, Slee (1998) encourages a critical questioning of the implications that an emphasis on school effectiveness can have on practices of inclusive education. Slee (ibid.) notes that school effectiveness rhetoric commonly revolves around arbitrary benchmarks of success regarding raising standards and league table rankings. He (ibid.) warns that where schools face pressure to demonstrate that they are 'effective', they may be unlawfully selective in their enrolments, ensuring only pupils who are likely to bring the school success are enrolled. He also notes the presence of a 'curricular fundamentalism' (p.110), which places a focus on 'agreed' basic knowledge in a way that denies individual pupils of their identities and potential to learn what is important to them and their communities - going on to suggest that this 'curricular fundamentalism' encourages pedagogical forms that are rooted in behaviourism and therefore diminish the value of, and space for, differentiated teaching, co-operation and critical enquiry. He therefore argues that where inclusive education is not defined by assimilation, it cannot fit into a model of schooling that prioritizes market driven notions of effectiveness and success. Within the rhetoric of school effectiveness, equity takes a backseat, it is "submerged within the rhetorical exhortation of the achievement in test scores" (ibid.,111). Importantly, when we talk about inclusive education that is implemented under a dominant rhetoric of school effectiveness and assimilation, we are not only talking about disability but ethnicity, social class and gender (ibid.). Similar sentiments are shared in

the recent work of Migliarini and Elder (2024). Slee (1998) also warns that we must take care not to demonise individual schools, but focus on the social and policy context within which the school operates.

Along these lines, Slee and Allan (2001) note a significant paradox in talking about inclusive education yet failing to acknowledge the policy context of marketisation and the acceptance of pupil referral units and alternative provision. In doing so, they call for a paradigm shift away from discussions about special educational needs that focus attention on the individual deficits of the child, rather than examining the education system and society more broadly (Slee and Allan, 2001; Slee, 2011). Importantly, Slee (2011) regards special education as a political decision whereby assumptions are made about the abilities of children, limiting their potential. This segregated form of education serves only to place the interests of the institution before the interests of the child (ibid.). Slee (2011) contends that segregated education is a precondition for educating disabled children at present, specifically in a marketised school environment where the disabled child is considered to be a threat. As such, Slee argues that education policy provides a rationale to look the other way when disabled children are excluded from school. Expanding upon this, Slee (2013) observes that due to increased focus on performance targets and accountability, teachers are encouraged to adopt a 'collective indifference' with regard to how disabled children are educated within mainstream classrooms. This collective indifference is fuelled by two things, bestowed understanding and professional knowledge and interest. Bestowed understanding refers to how knowledge of disability is commonly informed by the media which often conveys a sense of pity and helplessness towards disabled people. Professional knowledge and interest explains how educators

claim not to have the knowledge and skills necessary to educate disabled children and they therefore should not be expected to teach them (ibid.). Slee (ibid.) acknowledges how the field of education is enamoured by quick fixes, but quick fixes are not possible in inclusive education and they do not aid in the development of inclusive schools. Primarily because questions need to be asked of what institutions can do to change, rather than what pupils can do to fit into mainstream schools. Such claims reflect the earlier work of Allan (1999) who recommends that schools focus on becoming less oppressive places. Allan (ibid.) asserts that this requires the personal and collective responsibility to interrogate “ideolog[ies] of expertism” (Troyna and Vincent, 1996:142), with greater attention being paid to the co-construction of school policies that aim to develop communities where everyone is committed to inclusion. Thus, ridding the school of the ‘effectiveness’ mentality which views resources put into children as transactional - this can be especially damaging for disabled children who may not be perceived as producing a return on that investment.

Policies and everyday understandings of special and inclusive education commonly evoke the use of categorisation (see: DfE and DoH, 2015). Daniels (2006) expresses concern on this matter when stating that by categorising children as having ADHD or Dyslexia, teachers are obstructed from implementing a pedagogy of co-construction that is personalised and responsive. The reason for this is that “sociocultural processes of categorisation and pedagogic responses to categories once they are invoked can act to subvert this much needed responsive pedagogic practice” (Daniels, 2006:4). Secondly, Daniels raises concerns about categorisation being evoked in order to solve the problems of adults. He suggests that sometimes, when a child presents with needs that the

professionals find confusing, the child may be labelled in an attempt to solve the adults problems rather than to get to the root of the problems the child is experiencing. He further suggests that because medication is commonly involved in the categorisation of children, the political dimension of categorisation is concealed. Therefore, the categorisation of children according to diagnosed or suspected learning disabilities is intimately tied up within discourses of the 'norm' and 'Other'.

Graham's (2006:7) work questions the taken-for-granted nature of the norm in education arguing that it is "a man-made grid of intelligibility that...privileges particular ways of being" – therefore positioning children who do not conform to the norm as deficient in some way. According to Graham (2006) a clear example of this can be seen in how support programmes designed to help children, focus mainly on what the child can do better rather than how the school or school system is inadequate in its current form. Graham (ibid.) goes on to express concern regarding therapeutic responses to behaviour management, noting that they continue to reinforce the notion of Other through a 'discursive sleight of hand' which distinguishes one child, and their needs, from another.

A concern regarding medicalisation and pathologisation is present in all of the aforementioned research. Harwood and Allan (2014) focus significant attention on this, stating that psychopathologization is ubiquitous in schooling. Here they are referring to the ever increasing trend to categorise children as being at risk of developing, or having, a mental disorder – often recommended to be managed by medication. They (ibid:2) argue that "mental disorders have become part of the common parlance of childhood", noting that this is particularly relevant to excluded children whose behaviour is frequently

pathologized and medicalised. Importantly, Harwood and Allan (2014) recognise the intersectional nature of mental disorder diagnosis when explaining that children from minority ethnic backgrounds and economically poorer families are more likely to be diagnosed. They suggest that this can be explained by the misinterpretation of culturally specific behaviours and a desire to support and control families and children regarded as ‘lacking order’.

2.5 Conclusion

Managing pupil behaviour and selecting appropriate pedagogies demonstrate sites of division within the school sector. While behaviourism dominates English school policy, advocating for adult control over children as a way to manage behaviour, TIP regards talking and relationship focused interventions as essential for the prevention of ‘unacceptable’ displays of behaviour. However, as Becker-Blease (2017) and Khasnabis and Goldin (2020) demonstrate, what these two approaches have in common is an individualising perspective on pupil behaviour which either positions the child as being individually responsible for their behaviour, or individually responsible for ‘improving’ their behaviour. Despite this, this literature review demonstrates how research concerning school exclusions does largely implicate the role that systems and institutions play in increasing a child’s vulnerability to exclusion. Whether that be through a focus on the impact that the quasi-marketisation of schooling has on the likelihood of children with SEN/D being excluded (Daniels, et al., 2019a;2019b; Thompson, et al., 2021), the ineffectiveness of ‘colour-blind’ approaches to behaviour interventions (Gillborn, 1997; Osler and Hill, 1999; Parsons, 2009; Joseph, 2020), or the impact that

living in poverty can have on a child's ability to complete schooling without experiencing exclusion (Cole, et al., 2019; Partridge, 2019).

Through the inclusion of literature concerning children's rights and critical perspectives on inclusive education, it has been possible to extend the knowledge provided by research on disproportionate rates of school exclusion, particularly for children with SEN/D. In doing so, the medicalisation, pathologisation (Harwood and Allan, 2014) and 'Othering' (Daniels, 2006; Graham, 2006) of children who divert from the accepted 'norm' is made apparent. Alongside this, Slee's (1998;2011;2013) work on the incompatibility of segregated schooling with inclusive education goes some way to contributing to an understanding of which children are considered valuable in mainstream schools. Thus, Adami's (2023) assertion that a child's right to education does not go far enough to protect them from discrimination in the school setting is bolstered.

The research discussed above demonstrates that exclusion from school is both an enduring and systemic issue. However, while there is a significant body of research concerning school exclusion in the UK and beyond, very few studies dedicate full attention to the exclusion of primary school children. By focusing specifically on primary school exclusion, this project represents a marked departure from the vast majority of exclusions research focusing on the secondary school experience. Furthermore, the project builds upon existing critical research in the field by rejecting explanations for exclusion that are ground in individualised deficit; this is done through a focus on examining intersectional structural and institutional discrimination. Importantly, the literature presented here demonstrates that academic research on school exclusion does

commonly take into consideration the impact of austerity politics, the underfunding of schools and the quasi-marketisation of the school system in its explanations for exclusion use. However, this project, while recognising the importance of the aforementioned factors, expands existing literature and knowledge by undertaking a deeper interrogation of the fundamental values that presently underpin schooling and pedagogical practices. This is done by drawing upon theories of childism and theories of care. As such, a more complete picture of the context and circumstances within which exclusionary discipline has been allowed to flourish over the past decade is provided. A deeper engagement with childism and theories of care is provided in the following two chapters on research methods and theoretical framework.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Introduction

This research project aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the use of exclusionary discipline in primary schools in the West Midlands. As such, the project was focused around answering the following research questions:

- In a school system that emphasises competition, choice and high-stakes accountability, what purpose does the use of exclusionary discipline serve according to education professionals working in and with primary schools in the West Midlands?
- What can theories of care and the concept of ‘childism’ reveal about how children are made vulnerable to exclusion and suspension from primary school in the West Midlands?
- What can the experiences of parents of excluded children and education professionals reveal about the reality of inclusion in primary schools across the West Midlands, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic?

This chapter details the research methods and tools of data analysis that were engaged with during this project. I begin by explaining the research approach taken in this project, before moving to a description of the sampling strategy, data collection methods, data analysis process and ethical considerations. I conclude with a discussion regarding the methodological limitations of the project.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Research Approach

This project was approached from a critical qualitative paradigm. Braun and Clarke (2022:16) describe critical qualitative research as being “informed by a hermeneutics of suspicion” whereby the data collected as part of the qualitative research project is interrogated. This is not due to a distrust of participants or a denial of their experiences, but to more fully understand how language shapes their reality. As such, rather than taking my data at face value, I approached it with an interrogative stance using the meanings people attached to pupil behaviour, a culture of high-stakes attainment, the presence of children with SEND in mainstream classrooms, and capacities to care for the holistic needs of children to explore, and more fully understand, primary school exclusion. This potential to produce meaningful data through listening to people’s first-hand experiences of school exclusion makes a qualitative methodological approach particularly appropriate for this project. Alongside this, qualitative methodology has the additional benefit of foregrounding human experiences and allowing the same subject matter to be examined from different perspectives without there being a hierarchy of participation (Taylor, 2015). This was particularly important for this project where education professionals of varying degrees of experience, and parents of excluded children, were interviewed. As a researcher, I was mindful of not attributing more or less weight to the experiences of different participants – all contributions were valid and understood from a position that acknowledged the different contexts from which my participants were speaking.

The perspective adopted in this research project challenges dominant notions of ontology which position children as fully responsible for their ‘bad’ behaviour - commonly found in education policy pertaining to pupil behaviour. Such ideas are frequently rooted in deficit

narratives which regard any deviation from idealised norms as the fault and responsibility of the child and/or their caregivers. In contrast, this project was approached from a perspective that views people, particularly those who are marginalised in some way, as socially positioned in relation to power – a relationship which tempers their agency. This approach to considering the role and function of power in shaping the lives of individuals was informed by feminist scholarship. In particular, bell hooks' (1994:37) argument that "no education is politically neutral" is useful here. hooks speaks of creating inclusive learning communities that ensure the presence of every learner (and educator) is respected and valued; viewing students as empty values to deposit knowledge into does not create conditions that are optimal for learning. It is here that we can see hooks' assertion that every person in the classroom has intrinsic value and that value should not be dependent on their in/ability to conform to the dominant culture (hooks,1994). She therefore contends that power must be considered in any examination of teaching, examining power makes it possible to see where a classroom filled with individualism and competition is damaging to community and prohibitive to the embracing of difference; "dominant culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of ask, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, revelling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community" (hooks, 2003:197). This is the approach to thinking about schooling, society and individuals that underpins and motivates this research project; only through an examination of power is it possible to open up the space for a more inclusive, caring and loving education system that values and embraces diversity.

3.2.2 Sampling Strategy

During this project I adopted a non-probability purposive method to gather participants (Bryman, 2012). This approach was chosen as my research required access to a specific group of people with a specialism in primary education and located within the West Midlands. Despite this, in adopting methodological framework that deeply considers the structural and institutional factors that influence the use of exclusion, it is hoped that the findings of this project will be recognisable and relevant to people working in primary schooling across England.

I began this project without any connections to people working in primary education. Therefore, when seeking collaboration with education professionals I initially compiled a list of 302 schools in the West Midlands alongside the email address of either the school receptionist or headteacher. Emails were sent out containing information regarding the project's aims and research questions, as well as how I would like people to get involved. Out of the 302 schools that I contacted, only three returned a reply. Two of them demonstrated a willingness to be involved, the third declined to participate as they did not feel that they could speak to the research topic. Furthermore, I made a phone call to, and emailed, every local authority inclusion/exclusion team in the West Midlands as well as local authority educational psychology services. In the majority of cases, I was told that my details would be passed to a manager who would return my call, though this rarely happened. Despite this, cold-calling local authorities did have some success, and I was able to interview two school inclusion officers working in one local authority, as well as multiple educational psychologists working in four local authorities across the West Midlands. Beyond this I used my personal social media accounts to reach out to

educational professionals who may have been interested in the project and had experience of school exclusion – I felt using my personal accounts would provide an added degree of transparency to the project. Specifically, I posted in Facebook groups dedicated to primary school teachers in the West Midlands. I also shared my ‘recruitment’ poster on Twitter/X, making use of relevant hashtags such as, #PrimarySchool, #EduResearch #WestMidlands #EduTwitter in an attempt to ensure the poster reached a relevant audience – this method also had some success. In addition, I drew upon my contacts at the University of Birmingham, asking them to distribute the details of my research to anyone they thought may be interested in taking part.

Non-probability purposive sampling was also used in my attempts to connect with parents whose children had been excluded from primary school. Social media was my primary method of inviting parents to connect with me. I began by searching for Facebook groups specifically for parents of excluded children; however, I quickly discovered that no such groups existed. As such, I used Facebook to search for online parent groups and communities in the West Midlands. This search proved to be more fruitful and it became apparent that each of the fourteen local authorities in the West Midlands has an online presence for their Parent and Carer Forum. Many of these groups were private and as I am not a parent myself and therefore an ‘outsider’ researcher, I sent a direct message to the group administrator requesting specific permission to join and share my ‘recruitment’ poster; in most cases this request was approved. In total, my research poster was shared with the members of Parent and Carer Forum Facebook groups in 10 of the 14 local authorities in the West Midlands. Furthermore, in an attempt to catch the attention of parents and carers who were not in such groups, I used my knowledge of the area and the

assistance of Google Maps to locate other towns and cities that may have local Facebook groups for sharing information – this resulted in my ‘recruitment’ poster being shared in a further 15 public/open Facebook groups. Finally, knowing that children with special educational needs are disproportionately likely to be excluded from school, I also searched for Facebook groups dedicated to supporting the families of children with special educational needs, specifically those with autism, ADHD and anxiety-based school refusal. These groups were all, understandably, private. Once again, conscious of my positionality as an ‘outsider researcher’ and the fact that I am not a parent, I contacted the administrator for each group in order to request explicit permission to share the details of my project. My request was approved by two of the group administrators that I contacted. Overall, my ‘recruitment’ poster was shared in a total of 27 Facebook groups. In order to ensure the participant recruitment information was seen by as many people as possible, I spoke to friends and family with primary school aged children asking them what time of day they used social media. The consensus appeared to be 8-10pm therefore, I shared my poster between these hours a total of three times in each Facebook group, conscious of the fact that I did not want my research to be perceived as ‘spam’. This was a particular consideration in parent-focused groups whereby the majority of posts were seeking advice from other parents, I did not want to overshadow these important discussions. Beyond this, I posted on ‘Mumsnet’ and reached out to three UK-based ‘family-focused’ social media influencers. However, this did not result in any connections with parents. Figure 5 displays an example of one of my posts in a Parent and Carer forum Facebook group.

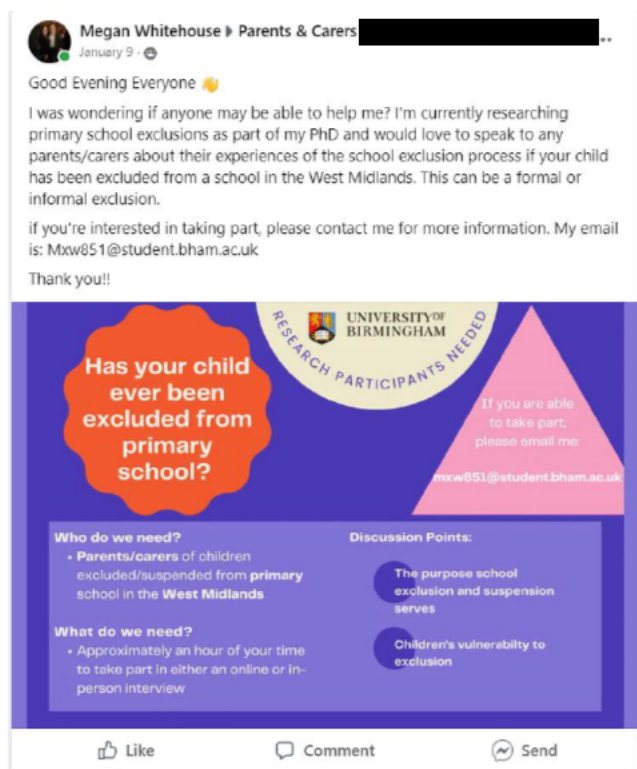


Figure 5 - Example post in a Facebook group

Despite the lack of success with ‘Mumsnet’ and social media influencers, my posts on Facebook groups did result in emails from five parents whose children had been excluded from school and were interested in talking to me about their experiences. Unfortunately, only three of these connections resulted in an interview. This was largely due to the competing demands on parents’ time. For example, one mother emailed me keen to share her son’s experience of exclusion after reading my research poster. However, while she was interested in taking part in an interview, she was also juggling childcare, work, arranging a new school placement for her son, while also taking the local authority to tribunal for refusing to place her son in the special school that she regarded as being most appropriate for his specific needs. As such, she understandably did not have the capacity to be interviewed. However, while social media posting only directly resulted in three

interviews with parents, snowball sampling led to the recruitment of two more parent participants.

As well as posting about my research on social media, I either called or emailed nine pupil referral units in the West Midlands. In doing so, I explained the aims of my research project and the fact I would like to speak with parents whose children had been excluded from school. It was hoped that these pupil referral units would be able to notify parents who fit my research criteria about my project. One PRU did get back to me with the contact details of three parents who were interested in taking part. However, it again transpired that while they had an interest in the project, they did not have the time to take part. In total, I interviewed 19 education professionals and 5 parents of excluded children about their experiences of primary school exclusion. The profiles of these participants, including details of their relevance to the research project can be found in [Appendix E](#).

3.2.3 Data Collection

This project relied solely on the use of semi-structured interviews for data collection. As part of this research, I interviewed 19 education professionals working in the West Midlands about their experiences of primary school exclusion. The individuals interviewed were comprised of classroom teachers, school governance professionals, local authority inclusion officers, educational psychologists, specialist autism support workers, senior leaders in schools and multi-academy trusts and teacher educators working in higher education. I also interviewed five parents of children excluded from primary schools. While I did not stipulate a time period within which the exclusion should have taken place, all participants had a recent experience of the process. I decided to

seek out individuals to embark on this research relationship with as they all have a personal stake in the issues discussed. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), this increases the likelihood of detailed and rich responses to the questions asked. The interviews were semi-structured. As such, I used an interview topic guide to direct the interview ([Appendix D](#)). This interviewing format helped me to focus the interviews and encourage my participants to share their experiences in their own words (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). However, the interview guide was not adhered to in any ridged or restricting way. Rather, it was used in a way that provided space for participants to expand upon particular areas of interest, discuss their experiences in depth and share anecdotes. The freedom afforded by this method, alongside the guidance it offered, provided the basis for many thoughtful, considered and sometimes emotional conversations. A further benefit of this approach was that the space for expansion and discussion allowed for conversations about topics that I had not anticipated would be discussed (Braun and Clarke, 2013). An example of this can be seen in the discussion of illegal exclusion that I had with classroom teacher, 'AS'. I did not think that such experiences would be shared so freely given how notoriously difficult it is to get people to talk about illegal exclusionary practices (Done and Knowler, 2021). However, as this topic arose in my very first interview, I proceeded to enquire about illegal exclusions in interviews with other education professionals where I felt that the rapport was strong enough not to offend the participant in asking questions about illegal practice. Notably, all of the parents I interviewed brought up the topic of illegal exclusion of their own accord when discussing how their child came to be excluded from school.

It was important to me that my participants felt that the interview was convenient for them and that they felt safe and comfortable. I therefore allowed each of my participants to select the location of the interview, many decided that they would prefer to do the interview online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This format had many benefits. Firstly, online interviewing proved to be convenient for me and my participants, saving time travelling to and from the interview while also preventing the need to find a suitable location for a face-to-face interview. Furthermore, my access to a 'pro' zoom account and full Microsoft account through the University of Birmingham ensured that I was able to decide on an appropriate meeting length, without restrictions (Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020). However, in an attempt to reduce 'zoom fatigue', I limited each interview to one hour (Gray, et al., 2020) – only going over the scheduled hour with the explicit consent of the participant. Despite some literature claiming that it is difficult to build rapport during online interviews (Cater, 2011), I did not find this to be an issue. I therefore agree with Archibald, et al. (2019) in their assertion that rich qualitative data can be produced during online interview contexts. Turning to more practical matters, Zoom and Microsoft Teams are both GDPR compliant, allow for the local storage of recording files and are user-friendly without the need to create an account (Archibald, et al., 2019). Some of these aspects will be further expanded upon in the research ethics section below. Finally, as in Archibald, et al., (2019), the only shortcoming of this online interview method, that I encountered, was technical difficulties. However, this was not a frequent occurrence. In each of the three interviews impacted by technical issues, a process of lip reading, pointing and collaborative problem solving, allowed me and the participant to

resolve the issue and proceed with the interview as planned. On reflection, these encounters served as an ice-breaker and therefore assisted in the building of rapport.

Not all of the interviews I conducted took place online, ten of the twenty-four interviews were face-to-face. Again, in an attempt to ensure the participant felt comfortable I allowed interviewees to decide the location of the interview. However, to maintain the safety of myself and my participants, all interviews were conducted in a public setting such as a café or an office within a school or university building. The interviews that took place face-to-face, while not encountering technical difficulties, did come with their own challenges. For example, cafés were often a noisy environment which while not obstructing the flow of the conversation, did at times make recording and consequently transcription challenging. In contrast to the experiences of Carter (2011), I did not find any significant difference in my ability to build rapport between the interviews that took place online and in-person. This may have been assisted by the fact that I made all online participants aware that there was no one else in the room with me during the interview, giving them an extra layer of confidence in my prioritisation of confidentiality. In addition, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it appears that people have become accustomed to communicating in a virtual environment and therefore doing so does not feel forced or out of the ordinary. Furthermore, as my interviews progressed I felt that confidence in my own interviewing ability increased, allowing me to become more relaxed when interviewing and focus my attention fully on what the participant was saying. Importantly, I do recognise that there were power differentials present in the interviews I undertook as part of this project – yet this varied depending upon the participant being interviewed. For example, as a relatively inexperienced female researcher, when interviewing individuals

with extensive experience working in the education profession the power and authority over the subject matter was distinctly held by the interviewee. This did not necessarily feel uncomfortable yet did enhance the sense of 'imposter syndrome' I experienced. In attempting to be a reflexive researcher, I recognise that this may have negatively impacted my confidence to ask follow-up questions during these interviews and explore the topic as much as I would have liked. Conversely, when interviewing less experienced education professionals I got the distinct impression that they were, in some instances, seeking approval from me as the voice of 'authority' on exclusion. This was demonstrated by interviewees asking if they had answered my question correctly, or apologising where they did not feel able to speak to a specific issue raised. Within this dynamic, I felt a degree of responsibility to ensure that participants did not feel that they had to provide me with a particular answer to any of the questions and therefore found myself reminding participants that I was only interested in *their* experiences of exclusion and the education system and there were no right or wrong answers. When interviewing parents, the dynamic was once again changed. Despite my age and relative inexperience as a researcher, I was conscious of the fact that I occupied the role of the 'professional' in conversations with parents and was concerned that this dynamic would lead to some initial apprehension from parents who had experienced difficult relationships and encounters with education professionals during their child's exclusion. I therefore emphasised that I wanted to understand more about parents' experiences of the exclusion process as part of my research, and I was not passing judgement on anything they said, nor was I expecting or hoping for specific answers to the questions asked. However, this apprehension to share did not come into fruition and the parents appeared

confident and keen to share their experiences with me – all parents described the experience as cathartic at the end of each interview. This assertion of catharsis came as a surprise to me as I incorrectly presumed that parents may find it difficult to discuss such a turbulent time in theirs and their child's life. Yet rather than finding the interview to be a challenge, the parents all claimed that it was nice to have someone listen to their experience without attempting to 'fix' the problem or explain away the exclusion. Hearing the positive impact that being interviewed had on my first parent participant, I quickly became very aware of how important it was for me, as the researcher, to allow parents the time to speak and share – as well as how important it is that I include their contributions in this project.

All interviews, whether online or in-person, were recorded using a Dictaphone purchased specifically for the project. They were then manually transcribed by me, I did this by reducing the speed of the playback and typing alongside listening. While this did take a considerable amount of time, approximately five hours for every one hour of interview, I decided this was the best option to protect the data of my participants. I am aware that AI transcription software is available. However, I was unable to guarantee that the audio would not be shared or accessed by software companies. Therefore, from an ethical perspective, I considered manual transcription to be the most appropriate, secure and reliable option.

As stated above, this research project involved 24 interviews of which 19 were with education professionals. Despite much qualitative research using the concept of saturation as the underlying rationale for sample size, I felt this spoke to a more positivist

research philosophy that did not align with my own approach. Rather, I was guided by Patton's (2002) work when considering an appropriate sample size for my project. Patton (2002:244) suggests that when it comes to sample size, the researcher must consider "what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources". As such, I did not set out with a specific target in mind but rather spent some time after each interview reflecting on what the discussion had added to the project, considering whether it added to the experiences of my other participants and whether it opened up any new lines of enquiry that may be useful to explore with future participants. These reflections were key to my research but there were also many practical considerations. For example, as discussed in the above section on sampling, it was not easy to find education professionals who were willing and able to take part in an interview. The difficulty in finding participants was underestimated but not completely unexpected, particularly as, at the time of interviewing, education was an especially difficult field to be working in due to a combination of factors including; an exodus of teachers and headteachers from the profession, a teaching assistant recruitment and retention crisis fuelled by poor pay, increasing child hunger, and pandemic recovery wrapped up in catch-up rhetoric. These circumstances when combined with my post-interview reflections, helped me to decide that 19 interviews with education professionals was sufficient for this project. Similar considerations informed my decision to stop at 5 interviews with parents. However, practical considerations did dominate in this instance for the reasons discussed above. Irrespective of this, each interview with a parent did add significant

value to this project, helping to build a more holistic picture of exclusion and providing me with a different perspective from which to examine the issue and its broader implications.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

This project engaged with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. This approach has informed the research philosophy, selection of research methods and data analysis technique. According to Braun and Clarke (ibid.), reflexive thematic analysis consists of six stages; familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme development and review, and writing up. I will now explain how I engaged with each of the aforementioned stages in this project, using them to inform and develop my analysis.

3.2.4.1 *Stage one: Familiarisation*

As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022), I began by familiarising myself with my dataset. This involved a variety of techniques but I regard the first phase in this process to be the manual transcription of my recorded interviews. While this is not considered to be 'familiarisation' by Braun and Clarke, actively engaging with the transcription process in this way helped me to immerse myself in the data. The active and careful listening required for accurate transcription provided me with the initial opportunity to note any interesting points raised by my participants, and initially consider whether common themes and experiences were beginning to be shared. After writing up and reading each transcript, I then listened to each interview recording for a second time. Here I made an active attempt to really focus on what the participant was saying while making a note of any key points, discussions, phrases or anecdotes that stood out as interesting and relevant to my research questions. In the final stage of the familiarisation process, I

critically engaged with my data through the use of a reflective activity. This involved asking questions of the data and being reflexive about my own interpretations and understanding of the information shared. Informed by guidance from Braun and Clarke (2022:43-44), during this final reflective process I made notes in response to the following questions:

- “How does the person make sense of whatever it is they are discussing?
- Why might they be making sense of things in this way (and not in another way)?
- In what different ways do they make sense of the topic?
- How ‘common-sense’ or socially normative is this depiction or story?
- How would I feel if I was in that situation? (Is this different from or similar to how the person feels, and why might that be?)
- What assumptions do they make in describing the world?
- What kind of world is ‘revealed’ through their account?
- Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?
- What ideas does my interpretation rely on?
- What different ways could I make sense of the data?”

Each phase of this familiarisation process was carried out for every interview conducted during the course of this project. However, I ensured an active engagement with the data by only ever ‘familiarising’ myself with one interview per day, this also assisted in preventing any confusion between data sets and ensured that the familiarisation process was not rushed.

3.2.4.2 Stage two: coding

Coding is described by Braun and Clarke (2022:53) as an “engaged-*and*-systematic” process whereby the data is read closely and any text relevant to the research questions is assigned a code label. Importantly for reflexive thematic analysis, I did not begin this stage with any pre-established codes that could be searched for in my dataset. Rather,

the codes were established from the data itself. However, that does not mean that my data was purely inductive. Rather, my coding process could be described as quasi-deductive (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2012) in that while I was guided by the content of my dataset my coding was also informed by my theoretical framework. Details on the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding this analysis can be found in the following [chapter](#).

This approach can be illustrated by the distinction between semantic and latent coding. I initially coded each interview transcript semantically, therefore meaning that I attached code labels that captured “explicitly-expressed meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2022:57). These codes commonly reflected the language used by my participants. After coding all interview transcripts semantically, I began the process of latent coding. This second coding phase involved more of myself as the researcher and my theoretical framing within the code labels assigned – with a focus on drawing out deeper, more implicit meaning within the transcript.

All coding was done on printed interview transcripts, with semantic coding in pink ink and latent coding in green ink. Once the interviews were coded, I used Microsoft excel to compile a codebook. This codebook consisted of three main columns including; the participant’s pseudonym, their occupation and the relevant extract from the transcript. This was then accompanied by additional columns containing the code labels. As some extracts of text were assigned multiple codes, there were multiple columns within which the code labels were contained (see below).

Participant ID	Occupation	Quote	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3

Table 1 – Codebook Headings

3.2.4.3 Stage three: Theme Generation

The coding process resulted in 532 separate codes being produced across the 24 interviews, these were then used to develop initial themes. I began this task by printing out every quote from an interview that had been assigned either one or multiple codes. I then spent time considering all of the codes that had been generated in phase two of this analysis, looking to see whether any of the codes shared similar ideas, sentiments and/or meaning. According to Braun and Clarke (2022:79), themes are supposed to “capture multiple facets of an idea...these multiple facets all need to contribute to the same core idea or central organising concept”. In addition to this, themes must assist in the answering of the research questions. As stated, my coding style in this project was fine-grained and many different codes were produced. Therefore, perhaps inevitably, many were not included within the initial themes developed at this stage of the analysis process. However, none were completely discarded; many were categorised as miscellaneous and reviewed repeatedly in order to ensure that my decision to label them as miscellaneous was correct.

According to Braun and Clarke (2022:84) theme generation and development must consider three things. Firstly, whether the theme captures meaningful information. Secondly, whether the theme is coherent and accurately brings the codes together. Finally, whether the theme has clear boundaries. Initial theme development led to the

production of 54 sub-themes that were located within 6 over-arching themes. These were: 1) The balance of care and harm, 2) The function of exclusion, 3) Practical and policy considerations, 4) Who is excluded, 5) The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and 6) Prevention. I displayed these sub-themes in six separate thematic maps. Thematic maps are virtual visualisations of each of the themes in the form of a spider diagram/mind map, each of the six over-arching themes had it's own map containing details of the corresponding sub-themes that were established as a result of the coding process. However, upon completion of this stage of the analysis, I noticed that not all of my initial sub-themes had clear boundaries, some overlapped and not all were essential to answering my specific research question. Therefore, as part of the next stage of the data analysis process I began reviewing and developing these initial themes.

3.2.4.4 Stage four: Theme Development and Review

At this stage of the data analysis process, Braun and Clarke (2022:97) state that good thematic analysis includes themes that are nuanced and rich, but that are also “built around a *singular* central idea or argument” (emphasis in original). Therefore meaning that the themes should not merge into one another. These final stages of the reflexive thematic analysis process encouraged me to revisit my initial themes and ensure that the above criteria had been met. To do so, I firstly revisited each of my over-arching themes and the sub-themes within them, ensuring that each captured something different, yet still relevant, to the research questions. In doing so, I spent time considering whether each of the over-arching themes had identifiable boundaries, whether the data within the them was strong enough to be used as evidence, whether they were coherent and finally, whether each theme communicated something important about the dataset. For me, this

stage involved some re-working of my thematic maps after coming to the realisation that the some data did not fit comfortably inside originally assigned themes and/or within the scope of the project. In particular, this related to data regarding the impact of Covid-19 which I had originally considered to be a separate theme before realising that it was in fact entwined with, an important to, conversations being had within other themes. Furthermore, I decided to remove the theme of 'Prevention' as, while this did provide some interesting data, the content contained within extended beyond the scope of the research project and research questions being asked here. However, this theme has provided some interesting avenues to pursue in further research. The process of theme development and review was not fast, it took considerable time to consider the appropriateness and strengths of each of the original themes.

My thematic maps were then adapted to reflect this deep engagement with my data, taking the total number of thematic maps from six to three ([see Appendix F](#)). The final three over-arching themes were: 1) Who is excluded from school, 2) Exclusion use motivated by policy considerations, and 3) Relationships as an integral element of the exclusion process. Once this stage was complete, I was able to clearly see how each of the themes related to my research questions and pre-existing literature on the topic of school exclusion. At this point, it was possible to begin considering how I could effectively translate this theme generation into thesis chapters that engaged both with the data I had collected and the theoretical frameworks being applied.

3.3 Ethics

Before beginning any data collection, ethical approval to conduct this research project was granted by the University of Birmingham ethics committee. The research was conducted on the basis of obtaining informed consent from participants. Therefore, at least one working day prior to each interview, I sent an email to each participant thanking them for taking an interest in my research and asking them to read and sign an attached information sheet ([Appendix B](#)) and consent form ([Appendix C](#)). I also asked that the signed consent form be returned to me in advance of the interview taking place. All interview consent forms were distributed digitally and the majority were signed and returned to me in a digital format. However, some participants did choose to print and physically sign the consent form before returning it to me in-person. Once returned to me, all consent forms were stored securely. Scans were made of physical consent form and then stored in password protected files on a password protected computer, alongside the digitally returned consent forms – any physical copies of consent forms were shredded. These actions were taken in order to ensure consent forms could not be accidentally lost or seen by anyone beyond the research team. The consent forms used for the interviews contained information regarding the processing of data, confirmation of the voluntary nature of participation, details of how to withdraw from the study and the contact information for myself and my supervisors ([see Appendix C](#)). Furthermore, I began each interview with a short statement about my research aims, while also giving the participants another chance to ask any questions. Despite the fact that all participants were required to read and complete the information sheet prior to the interview, I also read out the information on the consent form in order to ensure understanding and obtain

verbal as well as written consent – this verbal consent was captured in the audio recordings of the interviews.

All consent forms, audio recordings and transcripts emerging from this project were stored electronically on a password-protected computer in password-protected files. The Dictaphone used to record audio throughout the project was also password protected and all audio files were transferred to the secure computer within 24 hours of being created, they were then deleted from the Dictaphone. The only person with access to these files was me. In order to further ensure secure storage of the aforementioned documents, I also uploaded them all to the University of Birmingham's Research Data Store (RDS), a secure data storage platform whereby the uploaded files can only be accessed by those in the research team unless explicit permission is given by myself to grant access to other collaborators.

As stated above, in order to protect the identity of interview participants I transcribed every interview manually rather than using any of the AI facilitated transcription software. During the process of this transcription, I anonymised each transcript by removing any references to the specific county or town in which the participants live or work. I also ensured that participants' place of work or their child's school could not be identified by replacing the names of schools with generic terms such as 'mainstream school', 'specialist school', 'alternative provision'. This ensured an additional layer of anonymity while avoiding removing any necessary context from the interview. Furthermore, I attributed a 'participant code' to each interview participant, this code was unique and allowed me to accurately differentiate between transcripts. For clarity, a document

containing information regarding which code stands for which participant was stored in a password-protected file on my computer.

Finally, the data collection stage of this project took place in 2022/23 therefore, despite the World Health Organisation declaring Covid-19 no longer presented a global threat (WHO, 2023) the risk of Covid-19 transmission remained at the forefront of my mind. As such, I wore an N95 facemask to every in-person interview. I also ensured that I had my Covid-19 booster vaccine in August 2022 and my flu vaccine in November 2022 – I also regularly made use of rapid-antigen testing. These precautions were taken to protect myself and the people participating in my research.

3.4 Methodological Limitations

The most significant methodological limitation in this research was the inability to conduct non-participant observations in primary schools. When designing this project, I intended to engage in a combination of interviews with parents and education professionals, and classroom observations – as is reflected in my initial ethics application. Prior to submitting this application, I was advised that consent would only be granted to conduct classroom observations if the explicit permission of parents was given via an opt-in consent form. As alluded to in the above section on sampling, finding schools to participant in this research was challenging and despite contacting 302 schools across the West Midlands only two were willing to allow me to conduct classroom observations. However, while I was able to obtain consent from headteachers and classroom teachers to conduct these observations, opt-in consent from parents was not

so forthcoming despite multiple consent forms and reminders being sent out. As such, in November 2022 I submitted a revised ethics application to the University of Birmingham ethics committee requesting permission to conduct observations on the basis of opt-out consent. Unfortunately, due to high workload and staff absence in the research ethics department, I did not receive permission to proceed on the basis of opt-out consent until late March 2023.

At this point, I took some time to reflect on the usefulness and appropriateness of including observations in this project and discussed the best way to proceed with my supervisors. After this period of reflection, it was decided that it would still be beneficial for my project to include classroom observations, even if they would be for a significantly shorter period of time than originally intended. However, following the discussed disruption and in light of the fact that SATs examinations were upcoming, the headteachers who had initially consented to classroom observations in their schools understandably declined the opportunity to participate.

To mitigate disruption to the overall project, I focused on interviewing as many parents and education professionals as possible. Upon reflection, this was the right decision for this project. While the observations would have been an interesting and complementary research method, the core element of the research design was always intended to be interviews with people who have experienced exclusion use. As such, by focusing on the interviews as the only method of data collection I was able to dedicate my full attention to each of the interviews and engage deeply with the data analysis process. Through conducting interviews with education professionals and parents, it has been possible

gain a greater understanding of how and why exclusionary discipline is being used in primary schools in the West Midlands, particularly in relation to children with SEND and/or mental health needs, and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. This is particularly important knowledge as the majority of recent education research on the topic of exclusion focuses on secondary schools and does not include contributions from parents. Furthermore, as this project has been able to situate the practice of exclusion within the context of a cost-of-living crisis and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, a unique perspective on the issue has been provided.

3.5 Conclusion

To summarise, I adopted a qualitative approach when conducting this research because it afforded me the opportunity to engage deeply with the topic of school exclusion, going beyond statistical data regarding the frequency of exclusion use and instead exploring people's experiences, beliefs and rationales for use. While participant recruitment represented a significant challenge, the twenty-four semi-structured interviews that were conducted produced thoughtful, insightful and detailed accounts of primary school exclusion. As will be demonstrated in chapters 5, 6 and 7, the contributions of my participants when analysed from a perspective that considers theories of care and childism, provide a useful addition to the literature on primary school exclusion by situating the experiences of individuals within a consideration of the wider structural and systemic context that underpins the use of exclusionary discipline. To expand upon how the experiences of my participants were interpreted, the following chapter will provide details of the theoretical framework informing this research project.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Introduction

As can be seen in the literature review, school exclusion is not an under-researched phenomenon in itself, albeit there are fewer studies investigating exclusions occurring at the primary school level. This thesis contributes to filling that gap in the academic literature. Alongside this, by working with the concepts of childism and theories of care, this thesis engages with a deeper and more nuanced conversation regarding how and why primary school exclusions are used. As such, this chapter explores how care has been theorised at the individual, structural and institutional level. Then, inspired by the work of Kathleen Lynch, specifically her text, 'Care and Capitalism' (Lynch, 2022), this chapter delves deeper into scholarship concerning capacities to care under neoliberal capitalism; considering how this presents in school and education policies more broadly. Alongside scholarship on care, I have engaged with the concept of 'childism' in an effort to provide an explanation and account of primary school exclusion that implicates the role of structural and institutional discrimination; the concept of childism is explained in depth in this chapter. Finally, this chapter engages with post-structural work regarding subjectivity and subjectivation. These ideas are useful for further exploring the individual's relationship with, and connection to, power. As such, when used alongside childism and care ethics, they provide a helpful way to give an account of how children come to be positioned as 'at risk' of exclusion from primary school.

4.2 An ethics of care: theorising care

The concept of 'care' is underused as a theoretical tool in the field of education, with much of the knowledge regarding care and its use as a theoretical tool emerging from feminist scholarship. It is therefore unsurprising to see that some regard care as a concept that cannot be theorised, preferring to consider care as an action that is put into a theoretical context (Thomas, 1993). However, in the work of leading feminist scholar, Nel Noddings, we find an example of how care can be theorised. In her first book on the topic, Noddings (1984) argued that at the very foundation of ethical decision making should be the concept of care. When using this term, Noddings used care to describe a way of relating to others. As such, Noddings posited that all ethical and moral decisions should be based in care and caring relationships. In theorising care, Noddings took much of her inspiration from the institution of the family, asserting that caring is something that comes naturally to humans, we do not need to be motivated by ethical or moral obligations. Rather, humans' aptitude for caring arises out of memories of being cared for. In developing her ethic of care, Noddings (2002:19) suggested that there are three essential elements to the caring encounter:

- “1) A cares for B, that is A's consciousness is characterised by attention and motivational displacement, and
- 2) A performs some act in accordance with (1), and
- 3) B recognises that A cares for B”

Fundamental to this caring encounter is the idea that caring should be selfless; referred to by Noddings as 'motivational displacement'. However, Noddings notes that this may be difficult where the care-giver does not share the same values as the cared-for.

Nevertheless, it is important to, as far as possible, preserve the feelings of the cared-for and gently redirect values if necessary (Noddings, 2005). Receptive attention is another key element of the caring encounter for Noddings (2005), this is used to describe how the care-giver should listen when attending to what the person being cared-for is saying, without projecting themselves onto the cared-for; caring encounters should be without judgement. The idea that caring should be reciprocal in some way is also fundamental to Noddings' ethic of care. It is not enough to care about something or someone from a distance, one should instead direct their intention to caring-for in a way that paves the way for a reciprocal caring relationship.

Approaching the topic of care from a more institutional perspective, Tronto (2010) calls for the 'defamiliarization of care', the need to move understandings of care away from the family and individual in order to consider how care operates and the space for care in the current political climate. In doing so, Tronto (2015) asserts that while we commonly hear about a 'care crisis' in reference to a lack of care for the elderly the actual care crisis runs much deeper. It is being experienced in the minutia of everyday life, by people working in a variety of fields. Tronto therefore argues that the real care crisis can be found in the time people have for care and compassion – yet she is clear to point out that this is a political problem, not an individual or personal failing. It is for this reason that Tronto's central argument regarding care focuses on how the problems of care occur on an institutional level but are part of the everyday. Despite placing some distance between care ethics and individual caring practice, Tronto (2010) agrees with Noddings (1984) that caring actions should always be relational and concerned with meeting peoples needs. It is therefore unsurprising that Tronto defines care broadly as, "a species activity that includes

everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto, 1990:103). In building on this broad definition, Tronto (2010;2015) explains that care can only occur when four key elements come together: caring about, e.g. observing and recognising a need for care; caring for, e.g. committing to meeting the recognised care need; care giving, e.g. physically meeting the care need; and, care receiving, e.g. stepping back to consider how well the care need has been met. In establishing these key elements of caring, Tronto (2010) is usefully able to identify seven warning signs that an institution is not caring well. They are:

- 1) Care is only provided where there is misfortune rather than care being a part of the bedrock
- 2) Needs are presumed rather than accurately identified by involving the cared-for
- 3) Care is perceived as a commodity that takes time away from other things
- 4) Those being cared for are excluded from conversations about their own care
- 5) There is a focus on ‘care-giving’ but not on care attentiveness or care responsibilities which means that some care work goes unnoticed
- 6) Managerial functions of institutions are prioritized (given more resources) over the care givers in the organisation
- 7) Care work is provided by the least privileged in society

Tronto (2010) therefore suggests that when investigating care within an institution, we must consider how the institution understands and negotiates care needs, how care is

allocated and provided within the institution, and what processes of evaluation are used to assess the effectiveness of care work.

Taking a further step back and considering care at the structural level is Lynch (2022). In the text 'Care and Capitalism', Lynch (2022) posits that care is commonly perceived as a matter of ethics and is rarely considered when examining social justice issues – she regards this as a significant oversight, arguing that care is fundamental to the functioning of society and the concept of care allows us to examine deep rooted and complex social justice issues, while also provoking a consideration of how we can develop a more 'care-full' society in which issues of social justice can be challenged and even, resolved. However, Lynch also argues that theorisations of care cannot be complete until care and caring has been contextualised within the frame of neoliberal capitalism – recognising how willingness to care and ability to care are two very different things. It is Lynch's (2022) framing of care that most directly underpins why I position school exclusion as a lack of care in this thesis. As was explored in the [literature review](#), schooling in England exists, and is deeply rooted, in the context of neoliberal capitalism and the connected quasi-marketisation of education. This approach to education has the values of individualism, competition, 'meritocracy' and academic 'success' at its core; fundamentally undermining and eroding the space for, and value of, genuine inclusion, the acceptance of difference and caring relationships underpinned by mutual trust and respect. This thesis positions the exclusion of children from school as an essential component of the quasi-marketised school system, rooted in behaviourist pedagogy and policy that takes a deficit view of children and their families (DfE, 2024a; DfE, 2024d), exclusion facilitates the achievement of desirable performance data by ridding schools of children who are

perceived as a threat to the success of the institution. Relatedly, while the work of Noddings, Tronto and Lynch is central to this project, they all define care, and what it means to be caring, differently. While taking inspiration from Lynch (2022) when explaining why I consider exclusion to be a demonstration of a lack of care in the school system, I draw upon Held (2005:10) when defining exactly what is meant by the word care in the context of this thesis - “attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility”. Such a definition is appropriate for a research project that explores how the needs of some children, particularly marginalized children, go unmet in the current mainstream school system where there are perverse incentives to exclude children who are perceived as ‘disruptive’ and/or ‘naughty’ (Daniels, et al 2019b; Parffrey, 1994). In the remainder of this chapter I continue the discussion of individual, institutional and structural understandings of care focusing specifically on the space, time, function and presentation of care in the school system.

4.2.1 Care and Caring Under Neoliberal Capitalism

The impact that neoliberal capitalism has had, and continues to have, on care and caring provides the central focus of Lynch’s (2022) scholarship. Paying particular attention to the dominant values in neoliberal capitalist society, Lynch contends that the domination of competition, meritocracy and individualism stand at odds with values of care, love and solidarity. Yet despite this, these neoliberal values are continually reinforced by societal institutions, including schools, and their harm is ‘invisibilized’. As a consequence of this, neoliberal capitalism is afforded the potential to be care-less.

In linking these concerns back to the marketisation of everyday life, Lynch (2022:54) writes, “care’s centrality to life is further invisibilized when resolutions to care deficits are framed in terms of supplying care on market terms, as a purely technical service, through monitoring, recording and surveillance in a supply-chain management system”. Lynch therefore describes care and caring values as abject - they are commonly unrecognised and undervalued by society. An example can be seen in the poor pay and working conditions experienced by those in ‘caring occupations’ such as nursing and teaching. Furthermore, Lynch contends that employers commonly consider ‘love labour’ to be non-essential, therefore sidelining the value given to listening and spending time with those in need. In making this point, Lynch (2022) is drawing upon Folbre’s (2001) concept of the ‘invisible heart’. When writing about the ‘invisible heart’, Folbre is drawing a parallel to Adam Smith’s metaphor of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market which centres around the idea that forces of supply and demand sustain competitive markets. In Folbre’s (2001:1) text, the ‘invisible heart’ “represents family values of love, obligation and reciprocity”. Folbre asserts that despite these two features being in conflict, they are co-dependent - the invisible hand cannot exist without the invisible heart. Similar observations are made by Kittay (1999) who focuses on the oversight of care and dependency in Rawlsian liberalism. Kittay calls this failure to consider the inherent dependency of humans the ‘dependency critique’. In doing so, she argues that a consideration of dependency is important within any political and social philosophy – “as long as the bounds of justice are drawn within reciprocal relations among free and equal persons, dependents will continue to remain disenfranchised, and dependency workers who are otherwise fully capable of cooperating members of society will continue to share varying degrees of the

dependents' disenfranchisement" (Kittay, 1999:76-77). Kittay (1999:96) offers an explanation as to why dependency work is so undervalued in policy and the everyday, arguing that dependency work only appears to be oppressive because "the norm of freedom is shaped without attention to the role of dependency in our lives". The critiques offered by Lynch (2022), Folbre (2001) and Kittay (1999) all demonstrate how dominant social, political and philosophical ideals fail to consider the role and importance of care, love, solidarity and dependency in the rhythms of everyday life, leaving those who do provide this work on the sidelines of society.

This returns us to Lynch's (2022) argument that care work is essential to the running and success of public institutions, yet it is not recognised as valuable in the market focused system that dedicates greater attention to measurable economic outcomes. Delving deeper into this relationship between neoliberal capitalism and care, Lynch (2022) specifically identifies competition as a key barrier to care values. In doing so, she suggests that social life is framed by competition, meritocratic evaluation and measurement. This harms individuals and communities by providing the means to define them as failures despite the fact they are embroiled in a competition that they cannot win. It is for this reason that Lynch regards the aforementioned values as care harming, while contending that the dominance of such values encourages a passive acceptance of injustice – positioning injustices as legitimate and inevitable. Nevertheless, such ideologies are difficult to challenge because they profess seemingly credible principles such as the rewarding of effort and equal opportunities for all. However, these principles are undermined by the structural and institutional processes that they also help to conceal. Lynch (2022) contends that this focus on competition is incessant and has a

‘negative propelling effect’ in that harmful behaviours can stem from a feeling of inferiority. Despite its ubiquity, Lynch (2022:147) asserts that competition must at least appear to be legitimate, “there has to be some mechanism to make unequal outcomes morally justifiable and socially acceptable”. Lynch suggests that this justification can be found in the existence of metrics. The reason being that metrics are commonly perceived as being objective and therefore suitable for forming the basis of professional judgements, labelling and stratification. However, Lynch (2022:144) warns that, “every new classification brings a new means and rationale for control”. As such, judgements are able to be made about who or what is worthy of investment while fundamental logics of care and compassion are undermined.

4.2.2 Problematizing time within capacities to care

A further aspect of this discussion that requires consideration is the time that people have to consider care and care for others in neoliberal capitalist society. As stated above, Tronto (2015) regards the real care crisis as being located in the *time* people have for care and compassion. By problematizing time, we are afforded the ability to more fully understand its tension in care work. Davies (1994) asserts that care work that occurs in institutional settings, such as the school, is forced to align with the logic of the clock – clock time. She suggests that neoliberal capitalist society, with its focus on measurement, rationalization and efficiency necessitated this adherence to clock time. However, while clock time is dominant it is by no means the only way of thinking about time. Davies (1994:281) also establishes the presence of ‘process-time’, this describes “letting the task at hand, or perceived needs of the receivers of care, rather than the clock,

determine the temporal relation”. This description of process time demonstrates a friction with clock time; the fluid nature of process time is at odds with the desire for measurement and predictability demanded by capitalism. Davies therefore suggests that because process time is so dominant in care work, it can be difficult to see and measure what has been accomplished. This has the potential to induce a feeling of burn-out as the actions and care work undertaken during process time are frequently ignored when one considers notions of work load that only account for clock time. Davies further expands upon this when noting that where a workplace is understaffed, activities that should be undertaken in a process time manner are instead driven by clock time which has consequences for how those receiving care feel their needs are being met.

The hegemony of clock time has been further consolidated by neoliberal reforms, where organisational pressures emphasise the importance of being ‘on time’ over ‘spending time’. As such, daily lives in caring professions have become task oriented, this has been accompanied by a devaluing of time spent developing relationships (Deery, 2008). Lynch (2022) therefore describes time as a scarce resource that care has to compete with. Because of this, care work is commonly done in leftover time after work that serves the market has been completed – care work is not prioritized in the distributions of time as it is perceived as coming at a cost to productivity. This pressure to produce more with less time has implications for relationality as clock time becomes the key determinant in the prioritization of values, thus “care is made abject by being reduced to a ‘package’ of marketable, measurable products, in which time for relational work is neither named nor granted” (Lynch, 2022:88). Understanding time to be a scarce resource helps to clarify Yuill and Murrer-Hirth’s (2019) distinction between ‘paperwork time’ and ‘compassionate

time'. Here, the authors (ibid.) use paperwork time to describe the time social workers spend completing admin tasks, ensuring effective monitoring of their work is possible – time is linear within this framing and requires social workers to manage competing demands concurrently. Compassionate time however, describes how time is perceived when social workers interact with their service users. This is more cyclical, slower, relational and developmental in its aims. In making distinctions between conceptualisations of time, we can more fully understand how and why care is provided in the way that it is. To add to this, Anderson and Bengtsson (2019:1510) present the concept of 'timely care' which they describe as, providing "the right care at the right time". Anderson and Bengtsson argue that in order to more fully understand why care is rarely provided to youth at the 'right time', we need to consider subjective time dimensions – how humans experience time. Drawing on Weber (1978), the authors note that the bureaucratization of society has created the need for bureaucratic provision of care, and this care should be driven by rationality and only as an attempt to seek a means to an end. As such, bureaucratic time is linear, measurable and objectivistic. In applying these ideas to policy, Anderson and Bengtsson (2019) suggest that policy dictates specific waiting periods until support/care can be provided, yet this linear approach to time does not allow us to understand how people experience these waiting periods – for that we need a cyclical understanding of time. The distinction between these two conceptualisations of time is, they contend, the key to understanding and providing timely care. Therefore, Anderson and Bengtsson assert that if providing timely care is not integrated into the bureaucratic ambitions of care, the social welfare system will be undermined - "whenever there is arrhythmia in relation to these normed rhythms of society, there is suffering"

(Lefebvre, 2004:25). Importantly, the authors warn that the urgency to provide care to young people may cloud judgements regarding appropriate care, with professionals overestimating the usefulness and appropriateness of particular interventions.

While the above literature provides a useful conceptual lens through which to consider the everyday interactions occurring within the school, it does not explicitly consider the role of time in education policies and practice per se; this link between care, time and education is made by Lynch (2022) who focuses on the dominance of clock time within educational institutions. In doing so, Lynch claims that schools are mediated and managed by clock time, despite care work requiring a more fluid and cyclical logic of time that is responsive to the changing needs of children, if care work is to be received as such by the child. For example, a child may have scheduled one-to-one support between the hours of 9am-10am however, if this is not the time when the child requires that additional support, they may not receive it as care/caring practice. Indeed, Lynch (2022) argues that care becomes a form of supervision where it is only provided in dedicated, pre-established time slots that adhere to the logic of clock time. Importantly, when considering the dominance of clock time, Lynch (2022) argues that capitalism requires constant movement and the pursuit of more - more profit, more expansion, better Ofsted rankings and better league table results. Yet this pursuit of more is expected to be done with less resources and in less time - herein lies the issue regarding the time to care in schools, “any process or mode of organization that undermines time and/or presence for giving love and care generates affective injustices for those in need of care” (Lynch, 2022:81). The work of Colley, et al (2012) provides an example of this in practice. They assert that as the pace of work intensifies and policy changes increasingly focus on

exchange values of input vs. output and cost vs. benefit, care is put on the backburner as control and efficiency are prioritised. To demonstrate this, they present a case study in the form of the 'Connexions' service – a UK Government funded advice and guidance service for young people. Colley and colleagues noted how when cuts were made to the service and staffing levels reduced, performance targets with regard to how many young people the service supported remained in place. Therefore, due to the pressures of clock time and the presence of accountability measures, staff working in 'Connexions' prioritised supporting the 'easiest to help' – the young people who they perceived as quick wins as they required less time and resources. The example provided by Colley, et al., (2012) illustrates the detrimental impact that the dominance of clock time can have on the ability to provide care for those most in need. The ideas presented here further add to the conceptual toolbox that can be used to more deeply understand primary school exclusions, by dedicating attention to a consideration of how time is used in schools and the opportunity to use time differently, it becomes possible to consider exclusionary discipline at a structural and institutional level therefore moving beyond a focus on the role of the individual professionals within the school setting.

4.2.3 Applying theories of care to schooling

As stated above, Noddings was one of the first scholars to link care ethics with education and schooling, drawing particularly upon her experience as an elementary school mathematics teacher in order to do this. For Noddings (1992), caring should be an essential component of the teaching encounter whereby the teacher attempts to hear, see or feel what their pupil is trying to convey. In this caring encounter, the teacher must

engage in motivational displacement, putting aside their own wants and desires to meet the needs of their pupil – in the school, this involves not treating children like numbers or a means to an end to achieve specific targets. Importantly, for Noddings, care is primarily a relational act, not a specific set of behaviours. As such, “caring teachers will listen and respond differently to their students” (Noddings, 1993:19). This way of approaching teaching and the teacher-pupil relationship is in direct opposition to the current DfE policy which advises teachers to adopt pre-scripted words and phrases when responding to behaviour incidents in the classroom (DfE, 2024d). Importantly, Noddings (1992) makes clear that in the vast majority of cases, teachers do care about the children in their classroom. However, often “they are unable to make the connections that would complete caring relations with their students” (Noddings, 1992:2). When providing a reason for this, Noddings focuses on how education has been reduced to the instruction of specific skills and knowledge. Noddings argues that the purpose of this has been to exert greater centralised control over curriculum content, as well as over teachers and pupils themselves. Because of this focus on curriculum and didactic teaching, Noddings (1992) regards increasing behaviour ‘incidents’ as unsurprising. Alongside this, she provides a critique of a school system that encourages feelings of boredom amongst pupils while simultaneously encouraging teachers to attend workshops focusing on the use of swift assertive discipline, rather than making education engaging and placing restorative conversations at the heart of the behaviour management strategy. In her work, Noddings (1992) makes clear that she is not approaching this issue from an anti-intellectual perspective. Rather, from the perspective that children’s needs cannot and should not be ignored in the pursuit of educational excellence and continuous

improvement. Noddings (1992) goes on to suggest that if educators want to get the most out of interactions with their pupils, they should enter into a dialogue with them. However, she warns that where an educator enters into this conversation with a fixed idea of what the content and outcome will be, that is not effective dialogue. Noddings (2005) builds upon these ideas when writing about the presence of inferred needs in the school. Noddings (ibid.) notes that attempts to care commonly misfire in schools when the person providing care misinterprets the needs of the cared-for, this leaves the cared-for with unmet care needs. She regards this as common in education as teaching often contains the presence of inferred needs – whether that be in establishing the curriculum or when interacting with pupils and making decisions about what pedagogical approach would best suit the children. While Noddings (ibid.) does recognise that there is a place for an inference of needs in the school setting, she advises caution and suggests that insisting on inferred needs without consulting with pupils is authoritarian. Noddings (2005:158) makes her point very clear when stating, “we are not going to overcome poverty and misery by a bootstrap operation in schools. We need to remind ourselves that conditions in the larger society need much improvement and also that the aims of education include far more than getting high grades and test scores”. In an attempt to develop a way forward, Noddings (2012) later established four elements that she believed were key to embedding care in education. Firstly, Noddings (ibid.) explains the importance of modelling good care behaviours, suggesting that expressions of care must be demonstrated to pupils in order for them to learn how to care for others. Secondly, she foregrounds the importance of dialogue, which she sees as essential to the caring relation as it assists pupils in the interpretation of caring actions and provides the space for a

discussion of ethical questions. Thirdly, she suggests that children should be provided with the opportunity to practice caring with and for others, importantly, while these caring behaviour should be acknowledged they should not be rewarded as if children only engage with caring relations through fear of punishment or in pursuit of a reward they are not genuinely engaging in caring practice. Finally, Noddings argues that we should always try to recognise something positive in every person that we encounter, this includes recognising why children may be displaying inappropriate behaviours and directing them to a better self by engaging in dialogue.

While they regard Noddings' work on care to be admirable, Chatelier and Rudolf (2018) argue that an ethics of care is no longer relevant in an era of neoliberal responsibilisation. They outline three reasons for making this point: firstly, care relationships are caught up in an education system where pupils are positioned as having the intrinsic right to increasing their marketable value. Thus, caring is distorted into becoming something that assists in increasing the 'value' of an individual. Secondly, the reasons for caring are embroiled within the neoliberal rationality that governs education policy. Finally, Noddings' caring interaction (2005) requires the carer to place the needs of the cared for above their own, this can be difficult to do in an education system that places accountability on a pedestal in order to ensure professional survival. Despite this, Chatelier and Rudolf (2018:11) do not consider the formation of caring relationships to be impossible in schools, they are simply suggested to be more difficult in a "culture of mistrust and continuous improvement".

The work of Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon (2007) also helps to build a more comprehensive picture of how the metrification and marketisation of schooling negatively impacts upon capacities to care. They argue that a focus on producing rational and autonomous citizens has pushed love, care and solidarity work to the sidelines in education scholarship and practice. They go on to suggest that this order of priorities has been dictated by a desire to only invest in what has marketable value, “neo-liberal thinking in education has succeeded in doing what classical liberalism did not to; it subordinates and trivialises education that has no market value” (Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon, 2007:6). The work of McLeod (2017) builds upon these ideas when suggesting that relational ethics and care have dropped off the agenda in education due to the fact that teaching is traditionally and commonly perceived as a vocational profession within which care and caring comes as standard. Therefore, McLeod (ibid.) argues that care has become devalued as it has been further constituted as a gendered quality that cannot be converted into metrics. Dadvand and Cahill (2021) also provide a critique of a wholly personal view of care and caring in schools when arguing that that where the structural is overlooked, caring relationships run the risk of being romanticised and any care that does take place is positioned as the result of personal virtue. If care is understood as purely personal virtue, the authors warn of two consequences. Firstly, the labour involved in caring is overlooked. This prevents any examination of the context within which caring relationships are able to be formed and maintained, and the institutional capacity for care. Secondly, institutions are able to abdicate any responsibility for providing the conditions within which caring relationships can exist. Therefore, Dadvand and Cahill (2021:301) argue that when we talk about care, we should consider the structures *for* care, doing so allows a consideration of the

“relational and organisational practices and norms that influence teachers’ work”. Understanding the role of the institution in considering capacities for care is essential as it allows insight into why teachers may experience burnout where they are providing care labour without adequate support. Importantly, Dadvand and Cahill (2021) suggest that having in place appropriate structures for care to occur, such as collegial support, can encourage caring practices and inclusivity in schools. Further, “when structures for care provide an assemblage of interpersonal and professional support, they can create the collective and relational conditions necessary to enable teachers to unpack difficult knowledge in their classrooms” (ibid.: 311). These ideas are essential for developing knowledge and understanding of everyday interactions occurring in schools; while also providing a useful lens through which to examine barriers to inclusivity in primary schools.

4.2.4 What happens to care when there is a focus on school performance?

According to Dadvand and Cuervo (2019:379-380) the ethic of care present in performance focused school systems is “predicated on the assumption that students can act as autonomous, rational subjects...This conception of care undermines the important role that mutuality, relationality and recognition of difference play in caring relationships”. The discrepancy highlighted here illustrates the relevance of examining care and caring practices when researching school exclusion. If the focus of schools and school policy is on encouraging self-responsibility, the importance of relational care is potentially removed from conversations regarding the appropriateness of school exclusion. The role and place of care in education is expanded on by Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) who argue that care in the neoliberal education system has not been eliminated

but it has been co-opted to serve the performative agendas and targets imposed upon schools. As such, they posit that there is a tension in schools between, “the performative ethic of care that the school is committed to and a care ethic that can cater for the more complex needs of marginalized students” (ibid:140). Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) therefore suggest that this tension has the potential to facilitate the exclusion of children who require a different approach to care and caring than can be provided from within a framework that focuses on the maximisation of performance; as such, they argue that “accounting for difference is key to the provision of care” (ibid.147). Dadvand (2022) takes this critique further by drawing upon Butler’s concept of subjectivity to suggest that the performative³ ethic of care present in schools serves to ensure some pupils are unrecognisable as care subjects. In eliminating the space for differences between pupils, through the use of prescribed pedagogical techniques and a focus on academic standards, schools deny other ways of learning and being – thus producing ‘geographies of exclusion’. Dadvand (2022) further suggests that within performative practices of care, vulnerability is positioned as deficit while time and resources are rationed to ensure maximum benefit to school data – similar arguments are made by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) with regard to their concept of ‘educational triage’ and the D-C grade boundary. This work on the ‘performative ethic of care’ that dominates schooling is invaluable to research on school exclusion, providing the conceptual tools necessary to consider the

³ Here Dadvand (2022) is using the term ‘performative’ to describe how schools focus on care of academic outcomes rather than holistic care of children. He is not using this term in the same way as Butler despite drawing upon their work in this piece.

phenomenon with an acknowledgement of the complexity and nuance involved in decisions to exclude children from primary school.

Throughout the above I have explored the ways in which care can be theorised, drawing upon the contributions of Noddings (1984; 1992; 2005), Tronto (2010; 2015) and Held (2005) to establish what is meant by the word ‘care’ and how caring actions are demonstrated and received. In exploring how care can be theorised, I have also made use of research that implicates how the neoliberal capitalist system suppresses the time, capacity and value placed on care (Anderson and Bengtsson, 2019; Davies, 1994; Lynch, 2022) – particularly in education (Colley, et al., 2012). In demanding more to be done in less time and with fewer resources, the care that pupils receive in schools is increasingly metered out into allotted time slots (Lynch, 2022), one explanation for this is that care is devalued in the education system at present due to the fact that it cannot be converted into metrics (McLeod, 2017). This work therefore implicates and questions the dominance of a performative ethic of care in schools (Dadvand and Cuervo, 2019; Dadvand and Cuervo, 2020; Dadvand, 2022) whereby caring practices have been co-opted to serve the performative agendas and targets imposed upon schools, influencing which pupils are recognisable as legitimate care subjects in schools and which pupils are perceived as in need of more care and time than the school can reasonably provide in a system that demands a focus on performance demonstrated through metrics.

4.3 Childism

In addition to theories regarding an ethics of care and capacities to care under neoliberal capitalism, in this thesis I also utilized critical scholarship concerning childism in order to engage more deeply with questions of vulnerability to primary school exclusion. The term childism emerged in the field of psychoanalysis and was first used by Pierce and Allen (1975:15) who defined childism as, “the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child; it results in the adult’s needs, desires, hopes and fears taking unquestioned precedence over those of the child”. Importantly, they also argue that childism is ubiquitous in society; it is the first form of prejudice that everyone learns therefore providing a basis for the formation of other prejudices such as sexism and racism. These ideas were built upon by Young-Bruehl (2012) who also regards childism as a form of prejudice akin to racism or sexism. In making this assertion, Young-Bruehl encourages the reader to critically reflect on the role and presentation of power dynamics in relationships and interactions between adults and children. Young-Bruehl (2012:37) therefore defines childism as, “a prejudice against children on the ground of belief that they are property and can (or even should) be controlled, enslaved or removed to serve adult needs”. These different definitions from Pierce and Allan (1975) and Young-Bruehl (2012) contain within them the foundational idea, that children are widely perceived as inferior to adults and therefore, can and should be used to serve adult’s needs.

4.3.1 Childism is a form of prejudice

Despite childism being a relatively new term, it describes a prejudice that has existed for centuries (Medina-Minton, 2019). In explaining why the specific term ‘childism’ is

important, Young-Bruehl (2012) describes how the term ‘misopedia’ was used historically to express a hatred of children. However, due to the founding of children’s charities in the 19th Century, the term was no longer considered to be relevant (ibid.). Despite this, Young-Bruehl contends that by falling out of fashion linguistically, space was opened up to justify the mistreatment of children labelled as ‘bad’. Furthermore, it is important to note that childism does not describe a hatred of children per se, “people do not always hate those they subordinate” (Young-Bruehl, 2012:5). The purpose of using this term is to raise political consciousness of a systemic issue, just as has been done with the terms ‘sexism’, ‘racism’, ‘ageism’ and ‘classism’. Similarly, McGillivray (2022) argues that while childism is not a perfect term, an ‘ism’ is needed to make clear how children are subordinated ideologically, systemically and interpersonally. McGillivray (2022) expands upon this by arguing that the purpose of prejudice is to create an out-group for whom legal rights are denied and disrespected. By focusing on which characteristics of the out-group are different from the in-group, this denial of rights becomes justified in individual and social consciousness. These ideas can be further understood by turning to the work of Barth and Olsen (2020) who argue that children meet minority group criteria because they hold less power over their own lives and receive differential treatment to the majority (adult) group. The authors also note that children are more likely to be victims of criminal exploitation and less likely to be afforded appropriate legal protection and support. Barth and Olsen (2020) argue that recognising children are vulnerable to oppression has important policy implications, potentially increasing the likelihood that the voices of children are heard in the discussion and implementation of educational, health and social policies. It is essential to make clear here that while the Young-Bruehl (2012), Barth

and Olsen (2020) and McGillivray (2022) all discuss childism with some reference to the denial of children's rights, their work does not align with that of philosopher, John Wall. Wall (2022) asserts that Young-Bruehl's (2012) definition of childism is too deficit oriented, suggesting that it fails to acknowledge the agency of children. As such, he suggests that childism should be conceptualised in a similar frame to feminism, a liberatory concept focused on the gaining of equal rights and opportunities for children (Wall, 2022). Where childism is engaged with and operationalised in this thesis, I align with the work of psychoanalysts such as Peirce and Allan (1975), Young-Bruehl (2012) and McGillivray (2022) in considering childism to be a form of prejudice against children. For me, a discussion of childism that does not engage with structural discrimination rings hollow in a world where children are so frequently positioned as scapegoats for institutional problems (Young-Bruehl, 2012).

4.3.2 Personal, systemic and state level childism

Childism, like other forms of prejudice, is mobilised against and imposed upon children in a variety of ways in a variety of settings. Young-Bruehl (2012) focuses attention on the childism present in social policies and consciousness, she argues that childism prevents the needs of children being put before the needs of adults in social policy. In providing an example, Young-Bruehl (ibid.) discusses how conversations are commonly held about the financial cost of supporting and educating 'anti-social' children, yet rarely do such conversations examine the anti-child policies that these children are subjected to. Similar ideas are expressed by Adami and Dineen (2021). However, they regard childism as an institutional prejudice against and violence towards children, specifically focusing

on the impact that policies implemented around the Covid-19 pandemic had on children. They argue that when the majority of schools and child-focused services were closed to children during the pandemic the impact that this would have was ill considered. In doing so, the “line of communication between the child and the state” was cut, therefore pushing any violence against children into the private realm (Adami and Dineen, 2021:357). Furthermore, through this analysis of Covid-19 policy responses they demonstrate how it became clear that childism endures “through a socioeconomic reality in which children’s access to food for survival, their access to quality education, to a home, to clothes and shoes depends on the goodwill of adults” (Ibid.:365). Children were denied agency, support and rights as a direct result of state responses to the pandemic (ibid.). Their research bolsters Young-Bruehl’s (2012:15) assertion that “when childism is prevalent in a society *all* children are hurt, not just those classified as the ‘abused’” (emphasis in original).

Taking this theorising further, McGillivray (2022) has recently argued that childism operates on three separate, yet connected levels. Firstly, at the personal level, childism takes the form of verbal rudeness expressed towards or about children, as well as microaggressions that are used to encourage children to subvert to the will of adults. Secondly, at the systemic level, childism can be seen in how children are treated in the law and policies that concern their welfare, including education policies. When discussing system level childism, McGillivray (2022) refers explicitly to the lack of inclusion of children’s voices in policies that concern them, as well as the legalisation of child assault that can be seen in the acceptance of corporal punishment in the home and/or school. Finally, when discussing state level childism, McGillivray (2022) is referring

to policies that inflict death or injury upon children in large numbers, regardless of the intentionality. Here she makes explicit reference to poverty policies, the pandemic response, welfare policies, gun laws and residential schools. By differentiating between the various forms childism can take, McGillivray provides a useful theoretical tool for this thesis. Examining primary school exclusion through the lens of childism at three different levels provides an opportunity to more deeply understand why exclusionary discipline continues to be used in primary schools – taking account of the personal, systemic and state levels within which childism resides.

4.3.3 Intersectional understandings of childism

From its inception, childism has been linked to racism and sexism (Pierce and Allan, 1975). However, rarely is it explicitly considered through an intersectional lens. The work of Adami and Dineen (2021) and Adami (2024) marks an end to this knowledge gap. They argue that institutional discrimination against children can only be fully understood if an intersectional perspective is applied which makes it possible to understand how racism, ableism and sexism contribute to prejudice and discrimination against children. They suggest that by considering children to be a homogenous group, the violence they are exposed to is not fully or accurately considered. Therefore, any policy initiatives implemented with the intention to reduce violence against children are likely to be ineffective. Research from Foster and Smith (2022) draws an important connection between racism, sexism and childism in relation to elementary school discipline policies. In doing so, they argue that research on school discipline too often fails to consider childism when exploring how school-sanctioned violence is so normalised. Furthermore,

they contend that a child is increasingly likely to be exposed to disciplinary violence in school if they occupy multiple marginalised identities on top of their status as a child. Foster and Smith (2022) provide a description of a 6-year-old Black girl being restrained and arrested after kicking her teacher. While not attempting to draw hierarchies of oppression, here they note that it was her status as a child that “allowed those adults to treat her like property and ignore her humanity” (ibid:29). Despite this, they note that it is more common for Black children to be treated in this dehumanising way due to their frequent ‘adultification’, particularly of Black girls. They call this “anti-Black child sexism” (Foster and Smith, 2022:38), a term they use to describe how Black girls are commonly perceived as more aggressive and less in need of protection or nurture, and Black boys are regarded as threatening and therefore do not get to experience the “boyish childhood” (ibid.) that white boys do.

More recently, Adami (2023) has called for an intersectional lens to be applied when designing policies that promote child equity – a crucial consideration when making decisions on behalf of children. Adami (ibid) defines child equity as ensuring that children are treated fairly and according to their needs. Importantly, Adami (2023:141) states that “identifying instances of direct and indirect age discrimination against children by public institutions calls for a shift through childism and intersectional lenses from talking about children’s needs to a discussion about the power structures that deny children’s rights”. In making this statement Adami emphasises the need to pay attention to systemic and institutional manifestations of intersectional childism if child equity is to be achieved.

The scholarship outlined above provides a solid theoretical basis for examining how the everyday policies, norms and features of schooling can manifest as a form of harm or violence against children. Such ideas are particularly useful when examining behaviour policies and dominant approaches to responding to children's behaviour, particularly those that position adult's control over children as important to the functioning of a school. Childism, like other forms of prejudice, is about power (Barth and Olssen, 2020). Therefore, when childism is engaged with as a lens through which to understand the practice of school exclusion, it provides the potential to examine how exclusionary practices are linked to power, as well as the denial of rights. This is useful and pertinent when conducting research on a topic where it has been known for decades that some groups of children are more likely to be excluded than others.

4.4 Subjectivity and Subjectification in the School

Many of the authors drawn upon thus far include a degree of post-structural scholarship within their work, particularly the concepts of subject formation and subjectivity. Structural and post-structural theories are commonly positioned in opposition to one another. However, as Chadderton (2013) demonstrates through her use of both critical race theory and post-structural understandings of subjectivity, these ideas can work in tandem. Chadderton (*ibid.*) argues that while the relationship between the two theoretical positions is complex, it can be complementary in that they can be used together in order to produce a more nuanced understanding of how structures of oppression operate and shape people's lives. Childism is plainly a structural theory and perspectives on care draw heavily on critical, structural work while also crossing the boundaries into post-structural

thinking. The inclusion of both structural and post-structural work is important to this thesis in that when combined, they assist in building a more detailed picture of how some children come to be excluded from school, particularly those from traditionally marginalised groups. Therefore, this final section of my theoretical framework provides an explanation of the post-structural work that has informed some of my thinking when analysing the contributions of my participants.

Underpinning the concepts of subjectivity, performance and possible/impossible/desirable learners that will be discussed shortly is discourse. Discourse is a key concept within the post-structural toolbox, referring not only to spoken and written language (Foucault, 1972) but also to “language in action” (Danaher, Schirato and Webbs, 2000:31). As Youdell (2006a:177) explains, discourse is “constituted by and constitutive of linguistic, textual, representation and bodily practices”. Therefore, discourse can be understood as facilitating a frame of meaning within which interactions take place and institutions operate. Important to this research project is the idea that discourse shapes humans, “humans become human, are nourished or malnourished on the amniotic fluid of symbols, stories and representations” (Wynter, cited by Kromidas, 2019:67). This description from Wynter provides an explanation for why Foucault (1972) describes discourse as material – it has material implications and/or effects in that it shapes bodies and subjectivities. Central to the idea of discourse is the concept of ‘discursive frameworks’, this can be explained as multiple discourses operating within a given institution. Education and schooling can be perceived in terms of discursive frameworks in that a school is comprised of students, teachers and perceived/agreed objectives of education. Importantly, such discursive frameworks are not fixed, they

transform and evolve over time and as they are actioned (Foucault, 1972). Youdell (2006a) uses the idea of discursive frameworks to demonstrate how Foucault's understanding of the world is not fatalistic or reductive, but sows the seeds of possibility for change. The very fact that multiple discourses exist provides the possibility for subjectivities to be opened up and closed down, for them to be constituted differently (ibid.). Despite this, within the discursive frame of Western education systems, developmentalism is a dominant discourse (Kromidas, 2019). It is for this reason that race and class inequalities are allowed to persist and, more significantly, are justified – “development instantiates white middle-class children as the selected, casting out every other child as the dysselected” (Kromidas, 2019:72) Kromidas' use of the term 'selected' is deliberate here as she cites developmentalism as sharing the values of Darwinism. As such, Kromidas (2019:75) continues, “Whiteness is established as the unstated norm and ideal of development and of the educational endeavour. Children from 'diverse cultures and communities' (unveiled code for Black and brown) are positioned as deviations from the norm”. Youdell (2006a) presents a similar argument when stating that biographical discourses of race, class, gender and disability can, in some instances, make it “impossible for some students to be recognised, or recognisable, as learners” (Youdell, 2006a:96).

Central to the concept of discourse is scholarship on the topic of power, particularly concerning the role, place and influence of power in discursive frameworks. Drawing upon Foucault (1991), power is not considered to be hierarchical and cannot be attributed to a single source; rather, it operates in and through all people, practices, discourses and knowledges. In the context of school exclusion, it is particularly useful to think about how,

within discursive frameworks, there are regimes of truth which are upheld by power. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Ball (2013) claims that the infusion of psychology within schools has provided legitimation to the process of assessing and classifying children, serving to normalise and pathologize individuals within the classroom. Ball (ibid.) considers the act of measuring and testing in schooling to have 'professionalised' the practice of teaching, facilitating the 'scientific' categorisation of children in a way that allows intelligence testing to justify unequally distributed educational resources and assigning moral worth to children. The professionals who assign and name these labels are perceived as having enunciative authority within the discursive frame of the school, as well as the authority to determine which children are considered educable and which children are not.

This work on discourse and power is brought together in scholarship on the topic of subjectivity and performance. Foucault dedicates attention to a genealogical analysis of how subjecthood becomes possible within the larger context of discursive frameworks and the technologies of disciplinary power that flow through, within and around them. However, it is Butler's interpretation of subjectivity that is most closely attended to in this thesis. Butler, like Foucault, recognises the importance of power in the formation of the subject (Butler, 1995), but dedicates more attention to "how subjection works on the psychic life of the subject" (Davies, 2006), not only as a form of external pressure but something that every person depends upon for their existence (Butler, 1997). Therefore, mastery of what one is subjected to is both desired and struggled over. In order to explain how subjects are produced, Butler (1993:13) calls upon the idea of the 'performative', "that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names". Applying this to

the context of the school, the positions children occupy in school such as ‘special educational needs’, ‘talented’, ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’ are so because they have been designated to that child. As Youdell (2006b) explains, “while these designations appear to describe pre-existing subjects, *it is the very act of designation that constitutes the subject*” (italics in original). Discourse itself has productive power. Youdell (2006a:43) explains that what it means to occupy a particular subject position is “derived from existing knowledges, or discourses” and these knowledges must be continually called upon in order to have meaning. It is therefore the naming of a subject that makes the subject position possible.

However, in order for the naming of a subject to work in the setting within which it is hailed, it has to make sense in the terms of the pre-existing institutional discourses (ibid.). Importantly, as Youdell (2006a) and Kitching (2011:304) make clear, schools have ‘ideal learner norms’, this is commonly the white, middle-class, usually female child who is perceived as more likely to succeed academically and conform to school expectations. Therefore, existing outside of these boundaries can make it difficult for some children to be positioned as ‘desirable’ learners (Kitching, 2011), rendering their existence ‘impossible’ (Youdell, 2006a) within the discursive framework of the school. Laws and Davies (2000) apply similar thinking to the case of ‘behaviourally disturbed’ children. They argue that children’s recognisability as a credible subject within the school is dependent upon their conformity to expected norms of behaviour within the setting. Importantly, behaviour discourses in schools centre around the idea of choice. However, as with the findings of Youdell (2006a) and Kitching (2011), Laws and Davies (2000) note that if a child is not already recognised as having become a ‘good student’, displays of expected ‘good’

behaviour can be perceived as fake by teachers. Significantly to this research project, the authors (ibid.) suggest that if a child has not conformed to the expectations of 'good student' within the first three months of being in their class/school, the child is then positioned as 'behaviourally disturbed' within the dominant discourse of the school. This results in a labelling of the child as the problem, making it increasingly difficult for the child to ever again be recognised as 'good student'. This demonstrates the endurance and resilience of subject positions children occupy. Laws and Davies (2000) attribute this to the rise and dominance of developmental thinking and categorisation in schools. Teague (2022) also recognises the complex and vulnerable position of teachers whose survival as a subject is also dependent upon their recognisability within given identity categories. In doing so, she notes how difficult it is for teachers to challenge derogatory comments made about pupils, often by other teachers, while also maintaining their position as recognisable, acceptable teacher. She highlights that this is a particular challenge where discrimination on the basis of gender or ethnicity, for example, intersects with agreed ideas of acceptable behaviour/student subjecthood.

The concepts of discourse, power, subjection and performance explored above help to explain how some children are able to have a relatively uneventful and positive experience of schooling while others are not. The discursive frameworks that exist within the school and the biographical discourses that children occupy intersect, ensuring that children who are able and willing to conform to the expected norms of behaviour and being can succeed as learners. Those who cannot or will not are only allowed and able to exist on the margins of schooling, occupying categories of 'disruptive', 'emotionally disturbed' and 'troubled', to name a few. As Laws and Davies (2000) make clear, once a child is

positioned as an ‘impossible learner’ (Youdell, 2006a) or ‘undesirable student’ (Kitching, 2011), it is very difficult for them to overcome this positioning regardless of how well they ‘perform’ the role of good pupil. These ideas are essential for understanding in more detail how some children come to be excluded from primary school, particularly those who do not fit into the norms that dictate who or what a ‘desirable’ student should look like and be.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an explanation of the key aspects of literature on the topic of care ethics, childism and subjectivity that have been drawn upon in this research project. In doing so, I have outlined the approach to care ethics taken in this project, exploring how capacities to care in schools are shaped by neoliberal capitalism and dominant approaches to pedagogical practices, including behaviourism. By presenting a definition and examination of childism, including the importance of intersectional childism, I have demonstrated how and why the practice of school exclusion needs to be examined at the personal, structural and institutional level. Finally, these concepts are brought together by post-structural work on subjectivity and subject formation which provides the opportunity and potential to examine how children come to be positioned as excludable within the primary school setting.

5. EXCLUSION AS AN EXAMPLE OF INTERSECTIONAL CHILDISM

5.1 Introduction

School exclusion is a complex process that takes many forms and occurs for a variety of reasons. In what follows, I draw upon the views and experiences of education professionals and parents of children excluded from primary school to illustrate how children are made vulnerable to exclusionary processes in the primary school setting. In doing so, I focus upon the presence and influence of childism within the English primary education system, and how it intersects with other forms of systemic discrimination. As such, ableism, classism, sexism and racism are considered when discussing vulnerabilities to exclusion, as well as whether a child has experienced the social care system. This discussion is situated within the context of a Department for Education that favours behaviourist approaches to teaching and learning, alongside a promotion of zero-tolerance behaviour management strategies (DfE, 2024d). I will begin by providing a contextual discussion of the policy landscape before narrowing a focus on how systemic discrimination influences exclusion use and helps to construct some children as disposable.

5.2 A legacy of behaviourism

Behaviourist approaches towards behaviour management and the treatment of children have been, and continue to be, dominant in English schooling – a brief journey into recent history provides insight on this matter. Between 2010-2021, ex-MP Nick Gibb (Con), served as the Minister of State for School Standards. His belief was that schools should

adopt a traditional approach to teaching and learning accompanied by ‘old-fashioned’ discipline, supporting a crack-down on behaviour including the use of on-the-spot detentions (Williams, 2010). It could therefore be argued that the rising rate of exclusion use during Nick Gibb’s tenure as Minister of State is no coincidence. Harrison (2019) has argued this point, asserting that in promoting zero-tolerance behaviour management strategies, the Department for Education had, whether deliberately or not, increased the use of exclusion. Importantly, Pritchard (2014) makes clear that initial teacher training policy in England does not explicitly name behaviourism as a guiding philosophy or pedagogical approach. However, the values behaviourism espouses are implicitly present in initial teacher education and therefore visible in the classroom setting. A clear example of this can be seen in Teach First, the UK’s largest provider of teacher training, including a module from Government behaviour advisor, Tom Bennett, in their ITE programme (Teach First, 2020). Mr Bennett is an outspoken supporter of behaviourism and advocate for using exclusionary practices as a means to promote discipline in schools (Bennett, 2018). This enduring support for the disciplining of children through exclusionary practices is further demonstrated by the decision of ex-Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan (Con.), to appoint Sir Martyn Oliver to the position of Chief Inspector of Ofsted. Oliver is the Chief Executive of Outwood Grange Academy Trust, a MAT with a reputation for taking over schools in economically disadvantaged areas and using a high number of exclusions in order to, in the words of Oliver, “prevent chaos” (Staufenberg, 2018; Adams, 2023). He is also a commissioner for the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, a group that in 2021 produced a report claiming that there was no presence of racial bias in English schools and any negative experiences had by

children were more likely the result of their family structure and culture (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). It is therefore clear that strict discipline, denial of institutional discrimination and the use of exclusionary practices to punish children for perceived wrongdoing goes right to the heart of accepted pedagogy and education policy in England.

It is on the basis of the points raised above that the presence of childism in schools can begin to be considered. Young-Bruehl (2012:57) describes childism as, “a prejudice against children on the ground of belief that they are property and can (or even should) be controlled...or removed to serve adult needs”. While I do not agree entirely with Young-Bruehl’s framing of childism, the idea that children can be controlled or removed to serve the needs of adults is pertinent to the findings of this project. The ‘traditional’ and widely accepted behaviourist approaches to behaviour management are dependent upon adults imposing control over the behaviour, actions and decisions of a child. Lake (2004) argues that this is an act of oppression and serves to encourage feelings of powerlessness amongst children. Importantly, Adami (2023), while also regarding childism to be a structural form of discrimination against children, recognises the importance of applying an intersectional lens when examining instances of childism – in order to highlight the overlapping prejudices of sexism, racism and ableism. The importance of applying this intersectional lens to exclusionary practice is reinforced when we consider the fact that that children from minoritized backgrounds and those with SEND are more commonly perceived to be defiant (Richard and Cristianakis, 2013). Decades of research also shows certain groups of children are excluded at a disproportionate rate namely, children eligible for free school meals, children with special educational needs, boys, children in the

social care system, and children from Black, Irish Traveller and Gypsy Roma backgrounds (Hayden, 1997; Parsons, et al., 2001; Demie, 2021). The findings of this research project are no exception to this trend. In what follows, I will use the concept of childism to unpick and examine the contents of interviews conducted with both education professionals and parents, applying an intersectional lens to discussions of primary school exclusion in order to demonstrate how deeply entrenched and entwined these forms of oppression are in English schooling.

5.3 The intersection of ableism and childism

Education and understandings of how children learn in the Western world are heavily influenced by the contributions of developmental psychology and theorists including Vygotsky and Piaget. Such theories are grounded in the idea that children progress, learn, develop and achieve milestones at specific points in their life. In assigning identifiable milestones to children's development, the idea of a 'norm' or 'normal' child is produced – an ideal that all other children can be compared against (Chapman and Slater, 2017). Despite the fact that the concept of normative developmental stages is contested, these ideas remain present in education policy and practice. Significantly, developmental 'norms' are informed by Western concepts of childhood that can be considered as being both childist and ableist. Childist because it is adults who have decided what the desirable norms of development are for children (Adami, 2024); and ableist because dominant ideas of ideal childhood and child development are used to demonstrate how disabled children do not fit the norm (Runswick-Cole, et al., 2018). In the context of schooling, this has been used to justify segregated education in the form of 'special

schools' (ibid.). Importantly, Burman (2008) makes clear that this idea of 'appropriate' or 'normal' development reflects the values of a capitalist society whereby one of the main purposes of education is to prepare children for their role as future citizens, capable of earning and spending money. Therefore, constructions of normalcy in education are informed by what the purpose of education is perceived to be (Chapman and Slater, 2017) – this, is where the presence of childism becomes apparent.

Like ableism, childism is also an institutional form of prejudice (Adami and Dineen, 2021) resulting in both physical, emotional and symbolic violence against children. In recognising childism as an institutional issue, it is possible to see how discrimination, discriminatory attitudes and beliefs about/towards children, are upheld by policies, laws and regulations (Adami and Dineen, 2021). Yet in order to understand the oppressive function of such prejudices, they cannot be examined in isolation. I will demonstrate this in the findings I present below.

During my interviews with education professionals, a child having any kind of special educational need, behavioural, mental health or communication need was repeatedly highlighted as heightening their risk of being excluded from school. This association was made apparent during an interview with BP, a chair of governors at two primary schools, he told me:

"I don't think the schools that I work with exclude children other than children with SEMH. I think they're either children who've got conditions that are understood and known and then for most of them some provision is in place, but then there's sort of breakdowns and then they get excluded. Or there's children where these needs are not known or

understood, or they're children who've arrived at the school and the school hasn't had chance to get to know the child...So the kids we exclude in primary schools it tends to be SEMH, either known or unknown of some kind. Generally, they're excluded when the adults aren't coping. Children's emotional state comes and goes, that's kids, that's people isn't it, but it's when the adult's emotional state is up there and they're not coping that's when the exclusions happen, in my opinion.” (BP – Chair of Governors)

He went on to explain that while the child having a social, emotional or mental health need may contribute to their vulnerability to exclusion, it is not the need itself that is used to justify the exclusion

“It's normally either assault of another member of staff or other children. It is physical assault sometimes, but we've had racism, children losing their temper and then they pick on an adult and try and hurt them verbally” (BP – Chair of Governors)

In describing his experiences, BP, draws attention to the lack of consideration for the differing needs of children when noting that that children with SEMH needs are often not given the time they need to settle into the school environment. He also explains how the emotional needs of the adults are positioned as being more important than the emotional needs of the children – with adults being afforded the privilege to remove a child from their classroom if they are causing them any kind of emotional distress. However, children are denied this form of self-care through the expected rules and norms of behaviour that require them to remain in a classroom and follow the instructions of the adult in charge – even where that adult/environment may be contributing to their emotional dysregulation. BP's experience highlights that, as a result of being unable to remove themselves from the

environment and regulate their emotions, children often resort to attempting to cause some kind of verbal or physical harm as a way to communicate that their emotional needs are not being met. It is this communication of need that is punished through the use of exclusion and in doing so, children are denied the opportunity to both access education and develop important social skills.

Children, particularly of primary school age, need adults to assist them in developing their emotional regulation skills. For example, in Finland, while it is possible to place a child in detention, excluding them from school is illegal. Instead, attention in the Finnish curriculum is devoted to developing the social and emotional skills of children and young people; with children considered to be important, active collaborators and constructors of knowledge in the classroom (Pakarinen, et al., 2023). This exists alongside an approach to behaviour management that is child-centred, with education policy in Finland focusing on the usefulness of restorative justice (Gellin, 2018). Since 2001, restorative practices such as peer mediation and restorative circles have been used regularly in classrooms to help children learn how to appropriately manage conflict and difficult emotions (ibid.). In stark contrast to this, in England, while earlier versions of 'Improving behaviour and attendance: guidance on exclusion from schools and Pupil Referral Units' (DfE, 2008) devoted significant attention to the usefulness of employing restorative justice techniques in response to behaviour incidents, since 2012 all references to restorative justice, mediation and supporting 'at risk' children have been removed (DfE, 2012; DfE 2024a). Instead, adult dominance over children demonstrated by the encouragement of verbal disciplining and control over the movement of children's bodies via detention, school exclusion and managed moves.

There is also something to be said here about how children who are excluded from school are indirectly positioned as unintelligent. A local authority inclusion officer raised the point that she is seeing children being excluded from primary school who historically would not have been because, in her words, they are “quite bright”

“This child according to the data shouldn't be at risk of permanent exclusion because they are quite bright, we haven't noticed any learning difficulties or anything like that, but it is an SEMH need and therefore that support is needed but the agencies aren't available now” (DE – LA Inclusion Officer)

Through this statement, DE, perhaps unintentionally, constructs a norm about the level of intelligence of excluded children which feeds into ableist tropes about the educable and uneducable children that justified segregated education in England for so long. In addition to this, the ableist standards that children with SEMH needs are held to contributes to the paternalistic treatment of children and the use of exclusion for the ‘good’ of the child concerned. This is a clear example of how ‘benevolent childism’ (Adami, 2024) intersects with ableism and manifests in schools. In accepting exclusion use for children with learning difficulties as the norm, exclusion is able to be positioned as a positive process that allows children to receive care that is deemed to be more appropriate for their needs, elsewhere. While I do not deny that some children may require more support with their education through the use of adapted pedagogy and/or curriculum, it should not be necessary for children to have to ‘fail’ in mainstream education in order to access this support – it is even less acceptable that the exclusion process is so commonly framed as a kindness. Migliarini and Stinson (2021) would

describe this practice of excluding to ensure appropriate educational support as a 'comfort-fantasy'. In other words, this process serves a dual purpose of maintaining a sense of benevolence for the educators and providing the illusion that appropriate support has been provided; all while negating the need to explore whether systemic and institutional bias and/or discrimination has contributed to this need for additional support.

Many of the conversations around vulnerability to exclusion also raised the issue of schools now having to cater for more complex needs than they have done in the past, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was an experience shared by education psychologists and those working closely with schools and head teachers

"schools are reporting to us that they are getting more and more complex children. Certainly as a psychologist working in schools, our caseload, when I started it was more learning needs and 'easy work', but now it's really complex young children coming in. And I'm seeing for the first time young children in reception being excluded and that is a massive issue." (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

"Certainly in my career there are far more complex children in school now that we just didn't see 20 years go, the complexity of need is massively different [...] so the number of exclusions has definitely risen and I think the complexity of what you're seeing, children's back histories now are so much more complicated" (CP – LA Inclusion Officer)

There is something to be said here about the resources available to schools which will be expanded upon in the next chapter. However, this concept of 'complex' needs, in whatever way these needs may present, seems to be enabling the use of exclusion where

children are able to be positioned as overbearing, difficult or ‘too much’. Furthermore, in simply describing children’s needs and behaviours as complex rather than resulting from unmet diagnosable needs, the legal requirement for inclusion through the use of reasonable adjustments, as per the Equality Act 2010, can be bypassed. In fact, one local authority inclusion officer believed that schools were now turning to exclusionary measures more quickly than they did in previous years

“I think, there's options for schools in terms of reduced timetables and managed moves, but again I think schools are thinking to those more compared to back in the day when they would just try and get as much support as they could for the child and make those reasonable adjustments in the timetable and the curriculum. I think some of that flexibility has been taken away now” (DE – LA Inclusion Officer)

This declining inclination to make reasonable adjustments further contributes to the positioning of some children as ‘impossible learners’ (Youdell, 2006a), specifically children with additional needs, reflecting an ingrained and persistent ableism in the education system that allows the exclusion of some children to be perceived as natural, acceptable or even inevitable (Armstrong, 2007). This has somewhat been amplified by the Covid pandemic and the eruption of rhetoric regarding school readiness. All of the education professionals who took part in my research described how they thought the social and emotional development of children, as well as their knowledge of appropriate behaviour, had stalled or even declined during the lockdowns. This particular issue was not helped by demands from Government to ensure children had ‘caught-up’

“I got called into a kid in reception because he can’t sit on the carpet, I was like ‘ok, it’s September, so he’s been in school a few weeks, your phonics lesson is 45 minutes long on the carpet, how do we expect a five-year-old to sit on the carpet for 45 minutes’ and they’re like ‘but this is what we need to do, the Government set these targets’. And that is why, internalized that boy is a naughty boy but he actually just needs to be up and about, yet we medicalise and we label so much”. (HJ Educational Psychologist).

In recounting this experience with a child at risk of exclusion, HJ demonstrates how easy it is in the ‘post’-pandemic school system for a child to become subjectivated as the difficult or naughty child that is beyond the pale of the mainstream education system. Also present in this short vignette is a description of how benevolent childism, ableism and sexism operate on a systemic level. By forcing schools to engage with unattainable targets that do not take into account the impact and legacy of the pandemic, individual teachers survive by referring any children who do not subscribe to ableist milestones to educational psychologists in an attempt to avoid exclusion. I am not arguing that this is done with malicious intent but rather out of a desire to seek extra support for a child who they perceive as being, troubled, behind or vulnerable.

Speaking to parents of excluded children offered an interesting and valuable perspective on this phenomenon. All the parents I spoke to had children who were either diagnosed with autism or in the process of being diagnosed, yet despite this, the parents did not feel that their children’s schools were suitably accommodating their needs. In all cases, the parents I spoke to felt that their child’s behaviour was being misunderstood at school.

“my son was just completely overwhelmed at mainstream school, we didn't know that he was autistic, he is autistic. He is diagnosed now but we didn't know at the time and the way the school supported him was just appalling, absolutely shocking, there was no support there, they basically labelled him the naughty child and he was being sent out all of the time to sit with the headteacher” (OA – Parent)

Furthermore, another parent explained how following a change in headship, inclusion seemed to drop down the agenda at his child's school, with the responsibility for SEND being placed in the hands of a member of staff who he perceived as being uninterested and underqualified for that particular role

“when my eldest child first started there the SEND coordinator was one of the stronger teachers and was really good, I respected her. But then the role was passed to another teacher and then another and by the time my son was in need of SEND support, the SEND coordinator was probably one of the weaker teachers. She's lovely but she's probably one of the weakest members of staff and I felt she had probably been forced to take the job and that was kind of a reflection of how the head viewed providing SEN support and supporting children. She couldn't have done any less.” (VB - Parent)

Such experiences speak to how neurodiverse children can be perceived as a burden in the mainstream education system, their education is not considered to be as important as the education of neurotypical children. As such, rather than providing children with the support that they are legally entitled to, the schools that these children attended were evoking the use of behaviour charts in an attempt to regulate and control behaviour – removing children from the classroom, or the school, when such techniques did not

deliver the desired objective, pacification. Yet this is not the fault of the individuals in the school per se. Rather, it reflects broader exclusionary attitudes towards disabled people and children in society more generally, and the dominant pedagogical approaches imposed by DfE policy as discussed earlier. The disproportionate exclusion of children with SEN from primary school is just another example of the ableist processes and attitudes present in England. Yet, the ableism takes on another dimension in the school setting, in that it is also informed by systemic childism. When combined these forms of institutional prejudice serve to construct understandings of which children are ‘worth’ spending time on in school, which children are worth getting to know, which instances of perceived misbehaviour are out of character and which are to be expected because of judgements about who the child is. Which children exemplify the fully human (Kromidas, 2019).

5.4 Illegally excluding children with SEND

While the experiences discussed above may be shocking, none of the practices described in the quotes I have included so far are illegal. But this does not mean that illegal exclusions do not occur. As stated in the [literature review](#) no quantitative data exists on the topic of illegal exclusion from primary schools in England, let alone the West Midlands, and getting education professionals to talk about illegal exclusionary practice is notoriously difficult (Done and Knowler, 2021). Therefore, it is impossible to know with any certainty which children are disproportionately illegally excluded from primary school. However, when looking at data on secondary schools (Bradbury, 2018), it becomes apparent that the very same children who are disproportionately excluded from

secondary school by legal means are disproportionately excluded by illegal means. While I did not set out with the expressed intention to research illegal exclusions during this project, many participants discussed illegal practices that they had either observed or been involved in. When talking about illegal exclusions, the education professionals I interviewed did not explicitly discuss the characteristics of the children who were being illegally excluded, and these discussions were not in substantial depth. However, it was strongly implied that the children exposed to illegal practices had SEND.

“The child had sensory needs and high levels of anxiety and they [the headteacher] would say ‘look, we don’t want to put them under this stress, it’s going to be a very stressful environment over the next few weeks, we’ve got residential which he’s not going on anyway, so that’s a week where he will be on his own’ and so they kind of used every excuse in the book, saying ‘we’re not really learning much in the last few weeks, don’t worry about it, why don’t you go home, crack on with this and get him ready for high school in a way that we can’t” (AS – Classroom Teacher)

“It’s usually just a quiet word with parents, make them feel unwelcome, nothing explicit, just a little nudge and then the other schools end up collapsing under the weight of need” (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

“I know that there are some schools that have used, or have coerced families, to electively home educate their children so that they don’t get permanently excluded” (XM – Director for Inclusion and Safeguarding)

The interview extracts included here refer to an illegal exclusionary practice known as coerced home education. This is a practice whereby the caregivers of a child, usually at

risk of formal exclusion, will be called into the school to speak to the headteacher. During this meeting, the headteacher will explain to the caregivers that their child does not fit in at the school. This may be attributed to several reasons including, but not limited to, their behaviour, academic ability, mental well-being, or any additional needs they may have. Once the situation has been explained, the caregivers will be required to formally declare their intention to take their child off the school roll and educate them at home; this absolves the school and the local authority of any responsibility for the education of the child concerned. In some circumstances, home education may be an appropriate course of action for a child. However, such decisions should not be taken lightly and must not be encouraged by a headteacher or any other education professional. The quotes included here from AS, HJ and XM indicate a relationship between illegal exclusion use and a child having SEND and/or a mental health need. This was corroborated by the experiences that the parents of excluded children shared with me. All of whom had children who were either diagnosed with or in the process of obtaining a diagnosis for autism – each parent I interviewed told me how their child had been illegally excluded before they were legally excluded.

“in the mainstream he wasn’t allowed to do assemblies, he wasn’t allowed to go on school trips, he wasn’t allowed to do sports day. It’s like they wanted all the other perfect children on show and the rest can just be hidden away. In the special school even, the day Ofsted were coming in I was told not to bring him to school that day. They just want the perfect kids on show” (UH – Parent)

“But it definitely was not a last resort, the exclusions, it was definitely a first resort, definitely when it came to stopping him from going on school trips or if Ofsted were coming in” (WM – Parent)

“So the informal exclusion, the reduction in the timetable was very much pitched as ‘this is in his best interests because he clearly can’t cope with being in school full time’, so that was very much the angle taken for that” (TJ – Parent)

The experiences that these parents shared with me demonstrate different methods of illegal exclusion to the one discussed by education professionals. That being an illegal reduction in the child’s school timetable and encouraging parents to keep their children at home on certain days or when certain events are taking place in the school. As stated, the quotes here are all from parents of autistic children. Taken together with the observations of education professionals regarding illegal exclusion use, the presence of disability discrimination across primary schools in the West Midlands is clear to see. The experiences shared by my participants demonstrate an intolerance for difference, an unwillingness to ensure disabled children can participate in education effectively, and arguably an eagerness to rapidly remove children who do not fit the norm. The fact that these illegal exclusionary measures are engaged with when Ofsted are scheduled to visit a school also demonstrates how school leaders are aware that this intolerance goes all the way to the top of education as an institution. Including children in the mainstream setting, whatever the cost, will not be looked upon kindly. It seems obvious that such practices should be considered disability discrimination and schools are not permitted to exclude children *because* of their SEND by legal or illegal means. However, while

coercing parents to educate their children at home and advising them to keep their children home on certain days in the school calendar is illegal, the UK's self-imposed exemption from Article 24 (2)(a) and (b) of the UNCPRD – pertaining to the exclusion of disabled children from the mainstream education system – demonstrates a lack of willingness from Government to ensure that disabled children are educated in an inclusive and non-discriminatory system. Furthermore, as Ferguson (2020) points out, there are not any disincentives for schools to engage in illegal exclusionary practices, as not only are parents commonly unaware of the law around school exclusion and therefore do not challenge the decisions of the headteacher, but also, there is no effective punishment for schools who do operate in this way. This is demonstrated by the fact that Ofsted have been found to inconsistently apply their policy of downgrading schools to 'Requires Improvement' where practices that constitute off-rolling⁴ have been identified (Roberts, 2019b;2021).

Returning to the usefulness of childism for deepening our understanding of illegal exclusion, when deciding that a child will not be able to cope on a residential trip, in a school assembly or in the mainstream education system more generally, without consulting the child in question, the presence of adult hegemony within schools is demonstrated. In making such decisions on behalf of a child, the child is directly positioned as the problem with the solution being removal. Young-Bruehl (2012) suggests that children are commonly positioned as scapegoats for institutional problems, I am

⁴ 'off-rolling' is the term used by Ofsted to describe the removal of a child from a school roll. Importantly, this removal must be primarily in the interests of the school rather than the child to be considered 'off-rolling' (Owen, 2019).

inclined to agree. However, this is amplified if that young person also has SEND. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the illegal exclusion of children from primary school. Through this process, children are denied their right to an education because the school system does not have space and time to meet the needs of all the children in its care, especially where those children demand more resources. For me, UH's assertion that schools only "want the perfect kids on show" perfectly encapsulates the site where ableism and childism intersect, children are only regarded as valuable if they are perceived as being perfect in the eyes of adults – a perfect child being one that can perform 'correctly' during an Ofsted inspection, cope with exam stress, not get overwhelmed when in large groups and not in need of additional support when away from home. Any children that exist outside of this frame of reference are discarded, treated as disposable and surplus to requirements in an education system that does not safeguard the education of children with SEND.

5.5 Gendered interpretations of, and responses to, behaviour

All of the parents I spoke to felt that the behaviour of their children, specifically outbursts of emotion associated with their sensory needs not being met, had been misunderstood by the adults in the school – four of the five parents also connected this misunderstanding of behaviour to the gender of their child. Specifically, they believed their child's school was less tolerant of emotionally dysregulated behaviour displayed by boys compared to girls. This theme of boisterous boys and troubled girls became apparent after parents were asked whether they believed their child's gender had any influence over how exclusion was used. Their thoughts are reflected in the interview extracts below:

"If he had behaved in the way he did and he was a girl, I definitely think his behaviour would have been recognised as being the result of unmet need, rather than blaming it on naughtiness. Actually yeah, I definitely think that was part of it, that "he's a disruptive, naughty boy, he's just unruly and it's all down to bad parenting" (WM – Parent)

"Gender is an interesting one because he is a boy and he very much presents as a boy, he's very boy! I think in his specific case I don't know whether I can say yes or no but my broad perception of how people perceive him as a rambunctious boy who had undiagnosed ADHD and PDA and was aggressive and all these things, I think it probably would have been more concerning if he was a girl. As in, I think that maybe had he been a girl, they would have been less quick to go down the exclusion route because it would be very unusual behaviour for a girl, and it would have been very clearly special needs related. As opposed to him being a boy, boys will be boys, which is an awful phrase but I think there was an element of that at play to start with. Certainly, the conversations I had with staff members in the lead up to him starting school, because I identified to them that he was gonna be a challenge, and conversations early on and what was said was, 'don't worry, he's young, he's boy, just give us half a term and we'll sort him out'. So gender I do think had a part to play." (TJ – Parent)

As can be seen in the extracts above, both WM and TJ felt that their child's gender contributed to their subsequent exclusion from primary school. Such experiences can be unpicked with the help of Adami and Dineen (2021) who suggest that because childist and sexist attitudes are so ingrained in our society, some forms of violence against children are not recognised as such. Adults are largely ignorant to the oppression of children in

society as childism is so deeply ingrained into everyday collective consciousness. This is demonstrated by the “boys will be boys” attitude referred to above. In positioning the behaviour of these children within the confines of expected ‘boy’ behaviour, the children were initially denied access to two important things: 1) reasonable adjustments that would allow them to access the curriculum and mainstream education that is adapted to their needs, and 2) a level of compassion and understanding that gives them the permission and opportunity to discuss their feelings and channel their emotions in a way that does not result in harm caused to themselves or others. In holding this ‘boys will be boys’ attitude, schools forego the opportunity to challenge stereotypical hegemonic expectations of behaviour. Instead they contribute to sexist discourses that position violent and/or aggressive behaviour as ‘normal’ when displayed by boys. In doing so, harm is caused on multiple levels. In the immediate instance, the child is denied the opportunity to access education through the lack of adaptation to their learning needs and then through exclusion. Beyond this, the child is denied the opportunity to learn how to appropriately communicate their feelings and emotions. Furthermore, harm is caused on a societal level as these stereotypical expectations of behaviour are allowed to persist.

The enduring presence of childism intersecting with sexism and ableism is apparent in the quotes above. No more so than in TJ’s explanation of how the school responded to her concerns about her son potentially having a developmental disability - ‘don’t worry, he’s young, he’s boy, just give us half a term and we’ll sort him out’. In dismissing TJ’s concerns in such a nonchalant manner, the school subscribed to sexist beliefs about boys needing to be ‘toughened up’ (Adami and Dineen, 2021) while also contributing to ableist narratives regarding what is considered to be a real or legitimate disability and what is

simply, 'naughty' behaviour. Turning to this idea of naughty behaviour, TJ's experience also demonstrates how the age of her child is considered to be important by the school. In asserting 'don't worry, he's young...we'll sort him out', it is implied that his young age (4-years-old) means that he is still able to be moulded and shaped into what adults' perceive as being an 'acceptable' child and learner.

Expanding upon the intersection of childism, sexism and ableism further, father of three, VB, offered an interesting perspective on the gendered interpretation of, and response to, his children's behaviour. In the interview, VB recalled how despite his children displaying similar behaviours, his daughter was provided with support which enabled her to be included in the classroom, while his son was excluded on multiple occasions. This is despite the fact that the children attended the same school and generally interacted with the same members of staff:

"my middle child was actually quite aggressive when she started and she was quite aggressive in nursery but they were very accommodating and wanted to help, they seemed to treat her very differently, it was all about "what can we do". They couldn't do enough to help her... So I had seen that side of them and I had seen a very different side with my son. They would deny that vehemently, I guarantee that, but I know what I saw and what I felt and how they wanted to deal with my daughter's behaviour compared to my son's and in some ways, especially at the start, my daughter's behaviour was just as bad as my son's but the response was very different" (VB Parent)

Here the sexist, stereotypical assumptions about expected and acceptable behaviour are starkly apparent. While VB's daughter was met with concern and compassion after

displaying behaviour perceived as being unacceptable, his son was not afforded the same level of care. As a consequence of these enduring and harmful stereotypes about the capacities, potential and acceptable behaviours of children, some children are denied not only the opportunity to be educated within a truly inclusive education system, but also positioned as less deserving of care and time. There is less space for emotions and feeling for boys in primary schools and where these big emotions do manifest in acts of violence or aggression, they are responded to with violence, in the form of exclusion, rather than curiosity and compassion. Drawing again upon Adami and Dineen (2021), I suggest that this gendered difference in response to behaviour can be attributed to the patriarchal power structures that dominate society – that perpetuate the idea that boys can ‘take’ a literal or metaphorical beating. In this context, boys are positioned as more fitting recipients of ‘tough’ responses to behaviour, their displays of emotion in response to injustice are less acceptable in a society that raises children using phrases such as ‘boys don’t cry’ and ‘man up’ when emotions are displayed.

The education professionals interviewed were aware of the gender disparity in exclusion use. However, this was positioned as a somewhat natural and expected occurrence based upon gendered assumptions about how children behave. For example, boys were unanimously regarded as being more likely to engage in physically violent or aggressive behaviours that are easily identified by teachers and considered severe enough to be punished with exclusion. Whereas girls were regarded as being more likely to concern themselves with quarrels within friendship groups and less likely to become involved in instances of serious misbehaviour. Autism support mentor and former deputy

headteacher of a pupil referral unit, PJ, identified an interesting trend in the gendered nature of exclusion use;

“I worked in PRUs for about 13 years and I saw one girl when I first arrived and it took about another 6 years before I saw another one. However, in the last 6 or so years of my career, it was getting to almost a third of students were girls, it massively changed” (PJ – Autism Support Mentor)

This historically low use of exclusion for girls is consistent with the literature (Hayden, 1997; Tejerina-Arreal, et al., 2020) and potentially indicates the presence of girls being afforded a higher threshold of what is perceived to be misbehaviour. However, his observation that the rate at which girls are excluded from primary school has been increasing in recent years may reflect a trend highlighted by Power and Taylor (2022). Their recent research suggests that boys remain generally more likely to be excluded from the classroom than girls however, this is not the case for children from working class backgrounds. In fact, this recent research from Power and Taylor shows that of children from economically deprived backgrounds, girls are now more likely to be excluded from the classroom than boys. Power and Taylor (2022) suggest this is linked to the vilification of ‘ladette’ culture and a lower tolerance of misbehaviour for girls from lower class families. This offers an interesting perspective and while my own research did not explore this gender/social class intersection directly, the social class of children and their families was identified as a site of vulnerability to exclusion by the education professionals involved in my research.

The longstanding disproportionate exclusion of boys from primary school indicates a deep-rooted and harmful violence that is present on an institutional level. Boys are not biologically pre-disposed to being more aggressive. Yet the conversations had as part of this research project, as demonstrated by the quotes included here, reveal that to some extent this idea of biological determinism is still present. As a result, boys are more readily exposed to the violence of school exclusion. However, this is also harmful to girls. Where a girl exhibits typical 'boy' behaviour, she may be exposed to the type of care that involves medicalisation – of course, this may sometimes be necessary, and I do not wish to deny this. Importantly, these attitudes and responses to behaviour exist within a society whereby children are viewed as incomplete adults (Bhana, 2003), this further denies the degree of agency available to children and allows gendered expectations of normal behaviour to persist.

5.6 The vulnerability of children from poor families

Children being eligible for FSM has long been associated with disproportionate rates of exclusion and during my interviews with education professionals, there appeared to be a taken for granted attitude that the children excluded from primary schools would be those eligible for free school meals. Despite not being a perfect measure, free school meal eligibility is commonly used as a proxy for economic deprivation in education research – it can be seen from the quotes below that this is also the case in daily school life. While he did not expand upon the reasons why, PJ made this connection between the economic circumstances of a family and a child's risk of being excluded very clear:

“When I was working in the PRU it was very rare to get someone from an affluent family. It did happen, there were instances where people came from affluent families but not very often. They usually came from a background where money was a bit tight” (PJ – Autism Support)

Other participants did contemplate the reasons behind this perceived vulnerability to exclusion – in many cases, this was attributed to parents and their inability to control their children’s behaviour and/or protect them from harm

“I can totally see that children with particular needs and children that maybe, you have to be careful not to generalise about children on FSM, and I don't like the word disadvantaged but I think, from my experience of working with children eligible for FSM, the challenges going on in their life often meant that maybe their parents were struggling with behaviour and so we saw that in schools.” (GS – Lecturer on Primary PGCE)

“I've got this toxic mix in terms of educational need and then compounding that is the vulnerability of the families. Most of my deprivation is in that class and that coalesces with the level of safeguarding concerns in that class so I think, you could not extract one from the other. I was told off for calling it this but it's a co-morbidity, that's how I feel.” (FI – Deputy Headteacher)

“I would say special needs, free school meals and pupil premium are definitely up there generally because the correlation with lack of help with home and things, which I don't want to stereotype but it is. I think anyone can be excluded if they don't get the right, if they're not in the right place and if there's an incident, of course anybody, but definitely if

there's a lack of support from home and it's particularly SEN, pupil premium I would say those two are the big ones" (AS – Classroom Teacher)

The etymology of the word 'naughty' can be found in the late Middle English word 'naught' meaning to have nothing or to be without possessions. While it is not used in this context today, the linguistic association between being materially poor and being badly behaved is undeniable. Such associations may help to explain the presence of the 'taken for granted' attitude when it comes to children who are eligible for FSM being excluded from primary school – the idea that children who are poor are also more likely to be naughty permeates our social consciousness. Educational research has also long made this connection between unequal outcomes on the basis of social class, often linking this trend to low expectations, stereotypes and deficit views of economically deprived children and families (Dunne and Gazeley, 2008; Thompson, et al., 2016). Diane Reay (2017:60) suggests that education for working class children was set up to "control and pacify rather than to educate and stimulate" and that this legacy of classism and who is deserving of a full education hangs over into the present day. I do not disagree that classism is present in our education system, and plays a role in vulnerability to exclusion. However, I contend that this classism takes a new shape in schools as it is combined with childism. Classism usually involves looking down on someone perceived as being of a lower class and childism encompasses notions of inferiority based on biological age. In each of the quotes above, my participants referred to parents being unable to 'control' behaviour, provide for their children or even, keep them safe from harm. Having such views about the dependency of children, their need to be controlled and the inability of working class parents to do so not only demonstrates childism but also creates space for

the presence of paternalism; to make decisions ‘in the best interests’ of the child, even where that involves exclusion. Adami and Dineen (2021) draw attention to the presence of a rhetoric of personal responsibility with regard to children living in poverty, where stories of parents being unable to feed their children are met with words to the effect of ‘you shouldn’t have had children if you can’t afford them’. Taken in consideration with the quotes from my participants, it is not unreasonable to imagine that the exclusion of working-class children from the classroom or the school could also be positioned as the personal responsibility of working-class parents; good children from good (read wealthy) homes and families are not at risk of exclusion because they have been taught how to behave ‘appropriately’. Or in the words of Bourdieu (1990), they have the necessary habitus to succeed in a middle-class institution. As a result, the survival of children within the school is dependent upon adults access to, and distribution of, economic resources. However, it is unfair and inaccurate to place too much emphasis on the individual attitudes and beliefs of education professionals. Schools are not isolated from the larger political and economic environment and therefore, these issues are also institutional and systemic. While being eligible for free school meals was seen by my participants as increasing a child’s vulnerability to exclusion, the cost of living crisis currently being experienced in the UK was regarded as significantly exacerbating many of the issues children were already facing. The professionals I spoke to described the main impact of this cost of living crisis in two ways, 1) children do not have access to adequate nutrition and therefore their level of concentration and behaviour deteriorates, and 2) the mental health of children is being negatively impacted by witnessing their parents struggling to make ends meet.

“So it's about the nutrition that children are not getting and therefore they come to school, the concentration isn't there because they may not have eaten breakfast because their parents can't afford it, or that breakfast wasn't of any substance, and therefore they come to school and they don't have the concentration because they're hungry, they're thinking about the fact that they're hungry and so they get distracted, frustrated, angry and we see negative behaviours. We are seeing that at the moment” (XM – Director of Inclusion and Safeguarding)

“If there is a very turbulent home life with stressed parents, it will maybe cause stress and anxiety for the children which may manifest in school in behaviours. Some children, their behaviour, not a cry for help, but it's about the attention. So if they're not getting the attention at home because parents are so worried about bills and they are stressed then behaviour can manifest from that” (ND – Classroom Teacher)

Following the aftermath of the 2008 global recession and the subsequent introduction of George Osbourne's (Con) austerity policies - which led to the closure of youth groups, libraries and other essential children's services - exclusions from schools in England, including primary schools, began to rise. This rise in exclusion use came at a time where schools were struggling to balance the books and per pupil funding was cut by 8% (Martindale, 2022). Meanwhile, child poverty rose to 30% (Tucker, 2017). Thompson (2020:122) describes this “historical attack on the resources given to local government” as having a ‘catastrophic’ impact on the lives of children living in poverty; noting that the councils in the most deprived areas have faced larger budget cuts than those in less deprived areas. Expanding on this, Thompson (2022) suggests that the approach to fully

comprehensive and inclusive education has always been piecemeal in England. However, as the school system became embroiled in market reforms emanating from the 1988 Education Act, most recently seen in the academisation of schools and introduction of performance related pay, there have been severe consequences for children from disadvantaged households. Now, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the midst of a cost of living crisis, schools are facing the biggest cuts to funding since the 1980s (Adams, 2020) and 31% of children in the UK were in poverty in 2019/20 (JRF, 2023) – this figure stands at 38.4% in the West Midlands, recently dubbed the ‘child poverty capital’ of the UK (Lawson, 2023). As such, it is unsurprising to see the cost of living crisis being highlighted as a key element in the nexus of school exclusion. However, the very specific way in which these economic policies impact children is, in my view, another example of systemic childism. In reducing the funding available to schools and refusing to provide financial support to the most economically deprived families, while bailing out and facilitating the eye-watering profits of corporate giants (Lawson, 2022), the UK Government have perfectly demonstrated how prejudice and discrimination against children serves “adults’ access to power and property at the expense of children” (Adami and Dineen, 2021:364). This may not appear directly related to the topic of school exclusion. However, in maintaining the conditions whereby some children are made vulnerable to exclusion *because* they are hungry and living in poverty, educational inequalities are maintained. When examining the intersection between socio-economic status and childism, exclusion can be seen as a tool that both demonstrates and ensures children’s dependency on the good-will of adults (Adami and Dineen, 2021) to receive a full education; whether those adults are education professionals holding deficit views of

children and their families, or politicians and policy makers determined to make cuts to public services while purporting the idea that everyone has the same opportunity to succeed regardless of circumstances (Thompson, 2020).

5.7 Social care experienced children: the inescapable vulnerability to exclusion

While the DfE (2024b) statistics do not presently include a section dedicated to ‘looked after children’, my research, like Hayden (1997) and Timpson (2019) found that care experienced children and those currently classed as ‘looked after’ by the social care system were also perceived by education professionals as being more vulnerable to primary school exclusion. The reasons for this varied but included attachment issues, notions of inherent vulnerability and difficulty forming relationships with adults.

“looking at the profile of children that we have on our caseload. It's interesting because obviously there's the children in care or previously in care, those children are definitely vulnerable because they have so many different attachment issues, that in itself plays a part” (CP – LA Inclusion Officer)

“One child who only had one exclusion, but was always on the brink, was post-looked after, he was adopted, and that is something that I would say, not always because you don't want to label kids, but yeah” (JP – Deputy Headteacher)

“There is that breakdown in relationships, it's almost like they feel that they're not wanted. Some children that we work with who have been adopted or have spent time in a care home, it can really add to that sense of not belonging and so yeah, it's just, it's really

difficult because children and young people build positive relationships with staff and so the staff become trusted adults but then when they exclude them it's like 'oh ok, well I can't trust that person because they are basically saying that I don't matter and ` that I don't belong'” (RS – Assistant Ed Psych)

The quotes above are from adults working in a variety of professional occupations yet their assertions that social care experienced children are more vulnerable to school exclusion all have one common factor, each places the blame for this vulnerability at the foot of the child themselves. Yet simultaneously, the children discussed here are denied agency over their own actions and subjecthood. Above, both CP and RS discuss the exclusion of social care experienced children in reference to attachment. I agree with Hoult and Gibson (2023) that attachment-based readings of children’s behaviour are more considerate and useful than readings which position the behaviour of social care experienced children as being the result of an inherent tendency towards delinquency. However, I also share their view that seeing behaviour through the lens of attachment does not prevent children from being seen as damaged. Furthermore, once a child and their behaviour has been framed as the result of them being exposed to the social care system, it becomes very difficult for the professionals around them not to view their behaviour as confined within this frame of reference (Maclure et al., 2012). Such limitations on understanding the behaviours of children are problematic in that they deny children agency in accounting for their own actions while facilitating a presumption of need based upon an adult’s interpretation of the ‘problem’. Importantly, the problem is more often than not located within the child as opposed to the ‘neutral ground’ of the school. This is demonstrated above by JP who, in telling me about one of the children excluded from his school, revealed how this “post-

looked after” child was always “on the brink” of being excluded. JP’s statement reveals two things, that the labels and assumptions made about children who have been in the social care system will always accompany them through their school lives. But also, they are under an increased level of surveillance. In describing this child as “always on the brink”, JP suggests that he was teetering on a metaphorical cliff edge of exclusion and one small behavioural infraction could push him over the edge. This raises a question regarding what was it about this child that meant he was always perceived as being on the edge, why was he not provided with the encouragement to help him step back? Drawing on Hoult and Gibson (2023), I suggest that this was because the adults in that child’s life had provided him with an identity that he could not escape from. Regardless of the behaviours exhibited by this child, they would always be perceived as an expression of trauma and therefore, dangerous. As a result, this child was “robbed of [his] own [story]” (Hoult and Gibson, 2023:13) by adults that claimed to know him better than he knew himself. This is clearly not a unique experience as demonstrated by the fact that social care experienced children are disproportionately excluded. However, this illustrates the presence of paternalism (Adami, 2024) in the school system – the adult’s desire to have control over the situation, in constructing a frame of reference through which the child is perceived as being vulnerable to exclusion or in greater need of surveillance, comes at a significant cost to the child in terms of being afforded the freedom to express themselves and have their needs met and assessed appropriately.

Furthermore, despite the diversity of care experienced children and the unique lives that they lead, Hoult and Gibson (2023) argue that any and all behaviours they exhibit are viewed as an expression of trauma. They will always occupy the subject position of

troubled/traumatised child. This is demonstrated by CP's assertion that care experienced children are "obviously" and "definitely" vulnerable to exclusion. In making this claim CP illustrates how difficult it is for such children to escape the subject position of troubled. I do not think that any of the education professionals I interviewed were making a deliberate attempt to deny children of their agency. However, this unconscious, arguably benevolent, form of childism can result in actual harm where children are only understood and perceived in terms of their vulnerability and trauma.

While the above analysis makes the connection between childism and positioning social care experienced children as more vulnerable to exclusion, it is important to also consider the intersections with other aspects of children's identities. Data from the ONS (2022) reveals that while children entering care in England are mostly White British, they are disproportionately likely to be Black or of mixed ethnicity, and to be from an economically deprived household where the adults have a low level of education. It is important to consider these factors alongside a child's status as being involved in the care system when examining which children are perceived as being vulnerable to school exclusion – children do not live single issue lives, they are complex and multi-faceted with discrimination operating on multiple levels. I am not trying to be reductive here, but it is important to recognise that the intersection of biographical discourses can make it impossible for some children to be recognised as acceptable learners (Youdell, 2006a). Kromidas' (2019) work on the 'dysselected' is useful, she notes that within Western society the white, middle class, man is the "embodiment of symbolic life" (ibid.:71). Therefore, anyone who does not occupy this specific position is not considered to be fully

human, especially children, they are dysselected. Therefore, it becomes easier for the exclusion of the dysselected children to be normalized, accepted and left unchallenged.

5.8 Intersectional discrimination against Black and racially minoritised children

It has long been known that Black Caribbean, Mixed white and Black Caribbean and Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller children are more likely to be suspended and permanently excluded from primary school, such disproportionality is borne out in the statistics published on an annual basis by the Department for Education. In the West Midlands, the most recent DfE (2024b) data shows that Black Caribbean children are suspended from primary school at 2 times the rate of white British children, this figure stands at 1.6 times for Gypsy Roma children and 2 times for children of Irish Traveller heritage. Where permanent exclusions are considered, the disproportionate rates of exclusion are even more stark. Children from Black Caribbean backgrounds are excluded at 3.4 times the rate of white British children, this figure stands at 4 times the rate of white British for children from Gypsy Roma backgrounds and 5 times for children of Irish Traveller heritage. In addition to this, decades of research has highlighted how some children, predominantly children racialised as Black, are treated unfairly in the English education system. Bernard Coard was one of the first educators to raise awareness of this on a large scale through the publication of his short book that highlighted issues of discrimination, bias and unequal treatment of Black children in education. In 'How the West Indian child was made educationally subnormal in the British school system', Coard (1971) suggested that the main reason for Black children being in schools for the educationally subnormal

was 'cultural bias'. Here he was referring to how white middle-class teachers held an expectation for children to speak in 'standard classroom' English and engage in reciprocal dialogue with them in the classroom. Coard identified that while Black children were indeed capable of speaking English, their different pronunciation of words and lack of interaction in the classroom was often perceived as lack of intelligence or rudeness by the white teachers. Despite Coard's work now being over 50 years old, an assistant educational psychologist interviewed for this research project also identified cultural differences as a reason for the disproportionate exclusion of Black children from primary school:

"Sometimes there can be different cultural experiences, sometimes what a parent might see as appropriate behaviour a member of school staff may see it as totally inappropriate, so the child is being taught one thing at home and then at school it's completely different. So at school they are really struggling to know what is ok and what is not ok, due to cultural differences in some instances, so I think that definitely needs to be taken into consideration" (RS – Assistant Educational Psychologist)

A school governance professional also recalled observing higher numbers of exclusions at an inner-city school where the majority of the teachers were white and the children were from a diverse range of backgrounds:

"the schools I was involved with in the city were in real deprivation, several of my schools were in communities where parents didn't speak English and so the children didn't speak English until they came to school which can lead to frustration because they can't understand what they're learning. And there were cultural differences that sometimes

were a struggle to get over, you always want a diverse workforce because it brings a lot to the school but in one particular school they struggled to diversify their staffing and most were white middle class, C of E, working in a deprived, largely Muslim area and there was a rub between school expectations and home expectations” (SJ – Governance Professional)

While cultural differences were identified as a possible reason for the disproportionate exclusion of racialised groups, my participants were clear to emphasise the importance of examining exclusionary practice through an intersectional lens:

“There are always reasons because all behaviour is a communication, but yeah, definitely boys, definitely Black Caribbean and their family history plays a part as well” (JP – Deputy Headteacher)

“If we look at Black children there is that unconscious bias towards behaviour and how more penalised they are and that's backed up by research. So they're already at a disadvantage before they have even started, so if you mix into that any other thing like socio-economic status, the doubly disadvantaged stuff, they're on a hiding to nothing sometimes” (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

“If you think about the intersectional nature, so the children who carry multiple of those identities, they become the minorities of the minority and when they become that, their level of risk of being permanently excluded significantly rises. So if you took a PP [pupil premium] child who has got SEN and is from a Black Caribbean or Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background then the statistics would show you that they get excluded far more

than any other groups. So when you combine them all that significantly increases the risk for them and that clearly does happen” (XM – Director of Inclusion and Safeguarding)

The assertion that ‘cultural differences’ contribute to the disproportionate use of exclusion for children from minority ethnic groups raises an important question about the enduring nature and insidious presence of racism in English schools. However, the longstanding nature of this disproportionality and its intersection with other forms of discrimination suggest that it is too simplistic to consider the disproportionate use of exclusion as purely the result of individual biases expressed by individual teachers. If this issue is to be examined in full, the role of policy must also be considered. The work of Gillborn, et al., (2022) is useful here. The authors (ibid.) discuss the presence of IQism and factually incorrect beliefs regarding intelligence born out of racism and eugenics being present in the highest levels of Government in England. They specifically identify DfE and Ofsted support of ResearchEd - a conference for teachers run by Tom Bennett that has historically allowed presentations legitimising IQ and racialised connections between genetics and intelligence – as being a particular issue. Such reductive views serve to give credence to beliefs suggesting that those who do not occupy the categories of wealthy and white are culturally deficient, and therefore, any unequal and unfair outcomes or experiences had in education are acceptable or even, inevitable. Most concerning, this denial of structural inequality and discrimination does not only exist on the fringes of policy circles but goes to the heart of schooling and DfE interventions – as can be seen by the DfE’s multi-million pound investment in Tom Bennett’s ‘Behaviour Hubs’. In their analysis of the presence of IQists, anti-antiracists and authoritarian educators in the English education system, Gillborn, et al., (2022:12) suggest that there

is an “ideological commitment to ‘changing the narrative’ on race, education and other fields of social policy by delegitimising analysis of structural racism and characterising Black and working-class young people, and their communities, as socially disruptive and culturally deficient”. While the analysis of Gillborn, et al., (2022) is undeniably valuable and insightful, it does not consider how the racism and classism they identify is allowed to exist in the education system because of the systemic childism also present in our society. In perceiving children as ‘trainable’ and purporting the belief that they should submit to the will and direction of adults, the behaviourism informing and embedded within DfE policy and favoured pedagogy is inherently childist. For discriminatory practices and unequal outcomes to be accepted, they must appear to be legitimate (Ball, 2013; Lynch, 2022). The behaviourism embedded within the DfE and schooling in England does this through a focus on discipline. Instilling order and discipline in schools appears, on first inspection, to be a valid concern. However, much research has shown that this implementation of strict discipline has a disproportionately negative impact upon racialised and other minoritised children, all while maintaining an air of legitimacy and therefore discounting structural accounts of racism, ableism and classism. Strict discipline is described by Gillborn, et al., (2022) as being deeply racialised, the decades of evidence noting disproportionate rates of school exclusion validates this claim (Coard, 1971; Demie, 2021; Trevenna, 2023). Importantly, behaviourism could not succeed and endure as the dominant pedagogical approach in English schooling without the presence of childism; it is this deficit view of children, their appropriate place and appropriate behaviours that provides the foundation to behaviourist ideology. As explained in [Chapter 4](#), within Western society, there are deeply entrenched ideas about the rightful place

and appropriate behaviours of children, especially Black children, poor children and disabled children. An old English proverb states that children should be seen and not heard – the enduring presence of this proverb within public consciousness speaks to and reflects wider societal attitudes regarding children. Young-Bruehl (2012:294) considers this proverb alongside the idea that a child's role in society is "to be broken and tamed". Taken together, these phrases demonstrate how the punishment of children, including through the use of exclusion, is deemed acceptable and even necessary in both policy circles and public life. Moreover, we also live in a society where children were historically viewed as the property of adults – particularly poor and/or children racialised as Black – to be controlled by adults through paternalistic policies that would shape them into 'acceptable' and 'civilised' citizens (Marten, 2018). Such views of children also contributed to the widespread acceptance of the idea that some children, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, were ineducable (Robinson and Joseph, 2024). Therefore, I argue that while childism underpins the racism, classism and ableism present in the school system; behaviourism invisibilizes this discrimination by focusing on the 'inherent deficits' of the children within the schools, deliberately failing to account for structural discrimination.

Despite the fact that the disproportionate use of exclusion was identified by some of my research participants, this was not unanimously agreed upon. While many of my participants simply neglected to comment on the disproportionate exclusion of Black and ethnic minority children, some actively denied the existence of such disproportionality.

“Well, where I work it's not an ethnically diverse borough. From my personal experience, I wouldn't say any ethnic minorities have been overly represented but, again, the sample is probably skewed because there are so many white British individuals in the borough”
(IB – Educational Psychologist)

“not necessarily the children from Black and Afro Caribbean backgrounds, our statistics don't reflect that. We have to be very careful that when we're being judged as a local authority that we make that case because we don't reflect that pattern. We've got some very poor, struggling white families who for a whole range of reasons become part of our dataset and you know therefore yeah, we don't necessarily fit the box” (DE – LA Inclusion Officer)

These particular education professionals happened to work within the same local authority in the West Midlands. Such assertions were made despite the suspension rate for Black Caribbean students being consistently higher than the rate for white British students over the past decade in the LA in question. I do not believe that these participants were actively attempting to deny the lived reality of Black Caribbean children in the borough, as Gillborn has noted on many occasions, this unconscious bias and blinkered view is present across the education sector (Wiggins, 2017). However, the quotes demonstrate a significant gap in the understanding and awareness of the disproportionate exclusion of Black Caribbean pupils. If education professionals are to be fully informed about the true nature and extent of exclusion in their locality, they must be conscious of the ways in which systemic prejudice permeates and reproduces in the education system.

5.9 The hidden curriculum of exclusion

Finally, having illustrated how childism, ableism, sexism, classism and racism are all present in the education system and act as a force behind exclusionary practices, I will now briefly consider what I have called the hidden curriculum of exclusion. There was a consensus amongst all of the education professionals I interviewed that formal exclusion has a purpose beyond discipline and even safeguarding; it teaches the other children in the classroom and school a lesson about what behaviours will be tolerated. This is a very important point to consider when working with the concept of childism.

“I always tell the rest of the class, I’ll say ‘so and so isn’t in for a couple of days because we don’t tolerate that behaviour’ and then you have to use it otherwise it’s wasted. The other thing is, with the children I’m thinking of, will the children be made to work at home like they’re supposed to be? No, not at all. So, therefore, is it a punishment or a consequence for those children? Probably not. It is in as much as it’s on their record and it obviously would put them at risk of further exclusion. But in the moment, is it a consequence?” (JP – Deputy Headteacher)

The statement from JP, above, is complex and reveals a lot about how exclusion is used for many reasons beyond an immediate punishment of perceived misbehaviour. Firstly, JP in discussing how he “tell[s]” the rest of the class about the reasons why their classmate has been excluded, evokes and encourages a collective shaming of the excluded child. In being denied the opportunity to discuss the behaviour for which the child has been excluded, the rest of the class are encouraged to accept that what the excluded child did was wrong, and they should all agree with the judgement that has been made by the adults. This interpretation is bolstered by JP’s assertion that exclusion is a

“wasted” opportunity unless it is used to also teach the rest of the class some kind of lesson. I argue, based on the evidence presented so far in this chapter, that the lesson being taught here is less concerned with outlining appropriate behaviour and more concerned with demonstrating how adults have the ultimate power and control over the spaces that children are permitted to occupy. Furthermore, in this short statement JP recognises that exclusion may not work as an immediate punishment if the child is not forced to complete schoolwork at home. Irrespective of this, he still considers exclusion to be useful. In making this claim, I suggest that JP reveals two things about views of, and attitudes towards, children in the education system at present. Firstly, that denying children the opportunity to socialise with their peers and develop as human beings is not a punishment in itself; education and learning in the form of homework must also be co-opted as a form of punishment. Secondly, that the desired consequence of exclusion may not be an immediate lesson in acceptable behaviours but actually, a longstanding punishment that should play out throughout the course of a child’s time in formal education – as demonstrated by JP’s claim that exclusion will be “on their record”, subtly implying that they may find it more difficult to access an alternative site of education as a consequence of this exclusion. Importantly, JP was far from alone in his views about the purposes of exclusion beyond its ability to provide a teachable moment to a child.

“But then they have to say well what will happen if we allow them to stay in school, what does that show to other children who won’t realise that something has been done, they will just see that so and so did that on Friday and they’re still in school. What will we do if a member of staff was seriously hurt, I would be on us probably because the child was in school and met the criteria for an exclusion” (SJ – School Governance Professional)

School governance professional, SJ, also agreed that exclusion can be used to teach other children in the school a lesson about acceptable behaviour. However, in hypothesising about what would happen if a decision not to exclude a child was made and that child then went on to harm a member of staff, she also positions exclusion as a way of protecting the employment of those in the school. Therefore, revealing that the employment of adults and protecting them from any kind of investigation about their fitness to work is more important than the child and the potential harm that may ensue following their exclusion – recent research has revealed how excluded children in the West Midlands are more vulnerable to criminal exploitation (BBC News, 2023).

Finally, this theme of adult authority over children is further referred to by classroom teacher, AS

“I think if there were no exclusions happening it would allow for future generations to just have such little respect for authority, and actually a lack of respect for their education” (As – Classroom Teacher)

AS suggests that exclusion is a necessary process through which respect for authority can be instilled. Interestingly, she regards this as not only an immediate issue, but a generational one. In this way, AS is suggesting that using exclusion at the primary school level may prevent future exclusions and/or misdemeanours by teaching children to have respect for those who hold a position of power over them. In this statement, AS positions the constant threat of exclusion as fundamental for underpinning respect for teacher authority. Considering this statement from a pedagogical perspective, AS’s view of exclusion demonstrates the ‘top down’ approach to power and authority present in

English schools. Her assertion that the threat of exclusion secures a respect for authority demonstrates a clear pedagogical position whereby the teacher-pupil relationship is not considered to be collaborative or one of mutual respect. This represents a marked departure from attitudes in countries where there is a more child-focused approach to pedagogy. For example, research from Ojala, et al., (2019) found that teachers in Finland believe that authority in the classroom should be based on a mutual respect between the teacher and the pupil, arguing that it should not be produced through coercion or a culture of fear. Similar sentiments are echoed by Räsänen (2021) who suggests that pedagogical tact, situational awareness and mutual respect are essential for promoting the authority of the teacher. To be clear, I am not suggesting that AS does not value and/or does not attempt to cultivate a productive and respectful teacher-pupil relationship. However, I argue that her views on the purpose of school exclusion, connecting it to a ‘respect for authority’, reflect a deeply-embedded, institutional attitude towards pedagogy, schooling and children in England. As stated earlier, disciplinary exclusion is not permitted in Finnish schools, where education is regarded as a public good and a ‘whatever it takes’ attitude is adopted when attempting to ensure the educational success of all children (Hancock, 2011). Therefore, perhaps without realising, AS identified one of the key arguments made by Reay (2017), that the mainstream education system in England was never designed to facilitate the educational success of all children. Rather, its purpose was and is to “control and pacify” the working classes (Reay, 2017:60).

5.10 Conclusion

Adami (2024) argues that as children's access to economic and physical resources is determined by adults and they have limited influence over their own survival. I would argue that this is also true of children's experience of the school system, where education professionals act as gatekeepers to children's access of a full and comprehensive education. The use of exclusionary discipline is one example of this gatekeeping where children have limited influence over adult's decisions to remove them from the school environment. Throughout this chapter I have drawn upon interviews with education professionals and parents of excluded children to provide evidence for the various ways in which children are positioned as being vulnerable to exclusion from primary school. More importantly, I have demonstrated that an intersectional lens is fundamental when examining the phenomenon of school exclusion, in whatever form that exclusion may present. By applying this intersectional lens, I have explored how different forms of discrimination operate uniquely through one another and therefore, researching educational exclusion and its disproportionate use by gender, dis/ability, ethnicity or socio-economic status is not complete without also examining how these social and biographical discourses also intersect with childism. In applying an intersectional lens to the practice of school exclusion it has become possible to see how different forms of discrimination work together to make exclusion possible. In operating through and within one another, the various forms of structural discrimination outlined in this chapter succeed in producing acceptable and unacceptable learners – or, perhaps more appropriately they could be described as disposable children and indispensable children. While I do not wish to produce a hierarchy of discrimination, it is important to recognise

the insidious presence of childism within ableism, racism, sexism and classism. While it is no more important than other forms of discrimination, it is the one thing that unites the experience of all children excluded from primary school, of all children occupying the position of 'disposable'.

Entwined within the discussions of exclusion provided in this chapter, I have also drawn attention to the role and influence of behaviourism and education policy. The inclusion of such topics alongside systemic childism allows for a consideration of a hidden curriculum of exclusion. Throughout this research project, exclusion was discussed in a variety of ways by all of my participants, yet exclusion as a straightforward disciplinary action in response to a singular or repeated behavioural infraction was rarely positioned as the real reason for exclusion use. As I have explored above, children are excluded from primary schools for a variety of reasons, some of which relate to specific behaviours that are regarded as unacceptable, some of which are more closely related to their biographical characteristics, and some help to reinforce adult hegemony within the school setting. This exploration of exclusion use encourages a questioning of whether exclusion is really about discipline (in the behaviourist sense) at all? In what follows, I will take these ideas and expand upon them by considering how the education quasi-market also influences exclusion use, particularly the capacity of adults to care for children in schools where their attention is required to be focused on performance and competition.

6. THE POLITICS OF CARE AND CARING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

6.1 Introduction

Exclusion from school is more than the techno-bureaucratic process of physically removing a child from a classroom or school. This seemingly simple term and formal disciplinary process contains within it a wide range of human experiences, it is fundamentally a relational process. Here, I use this positioning as a point of departure when considering how children come to be vulnerable to exclusionary discipline. In doing so, I engage with Youdell's (2006a) concept of the 'acceptable' and 'impossible' learner, and Kitching's (2011) related concept of the 'desirable' pupil/classmate to explore how some children come to be positioned as 'Other' in the mainstream primary school setting. Importantly, I situate the positioning of children as 'acceptable/impossible' within a wider conversation concerning the politics of care and caring in a neoliberal capitalist school system.

6.2 Caring in a transactional school system

There is a long history within the sociology of education that demonstrates how certain children are positioned as being more or less valuable to the school on the basis of their likely examination results (Ball, 1994; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). However, the transactional nature of this school-pupil relationship was made very clear in this research project by Autism Support Mentor, PJ

"From a school's point of view, students that are gonna get very good grades are worth something so them, so they will try a bit harder to keep hold of them and will give them

more leniency and teachers don't feel as worried about giving them leniency if they're gonna get a grade out of it at the end and also, I think SEN students cost the school budget more money and because they cost more money there is an incentive not to have them in school because they just cost time and energy to keep them on board for a variety of reasons” (PJ – Autism Support Mentor)

Here, it can be seen that PJ is making a connection between how ‘valuable’ a child is perceived as being and how their behaviour is interpreted and tolerated. In making this connection, PJ demonstrates how academic success is of utmost importance to schools. His observations reflect Noddings’ (1992:13) claim that “in the real world, children are too often valued for their achievement. They become resources”. Of particular significance is PJ’s reference to children with SEN. As already stated, children with SEN and an EHCP are 30 times more likely to be permanently excluded from a primary school in the West Midlands than children without SEN provision (DfE, 2024b). PJ’s description of this transactional nature of schooling and varying levels of tolerance for behaviour depending upon who the child is, provides insight into why children with SEN provision are disproportionately excluded. Using the economic terminology adopted by PJ, their presence in mainstream schooling is regarded as more ‘costly’ to schools and thus, they are perceived as offering a worse return on investment. The insidious presence of market values in the school is acknowledged as a contributory factor to the use of exclusion in literature on the topic (Hayden, 1997; Daniels, et al., 2019), and the pressure to ensure children are passing tests has increasingly been a focus of those working in English schools (Astle, 2017) . Echoing the experiences of children taking part in Reay and

William's (1999) research, my findings show that children also internalise the pressure to perform to the test

"This one time, this one particular teacher, my son came bottom in the spelling test and she called him out on it in front of the whole class and that was the day he had his first ever meltdown. She accused him of not practising but he really had been and he tried really hard but he just couldn't do it that day, he was just in pieces "I'm stupid, I can't do it". He was six." (OA – Parent)

Here, OA was describing the experience that her autistic son had when he failed to perform as expected in the class spelling test. This interaction directly preceded his first exclusion from primary school. This incident does not describe the act of exclusion per se. However, it provides insight into how children are made vulnerable to exclusion⁵. The experience of OA's son demonstrates a tension present in schools, one where underperformance in a test leads to a child being reprimanded. Importantly, as PJ makes clear above, children who are not achieving 'good' grades are worth less to the school and therefore, their position as a 'desirable' (Kitching, 2011) pupil in the school setting is insecure. Lynch (2022:150) suggests that not considering all children as equally worthy of investment is a manifestation of "eugenics-related logic" in the education system. Furthermore, attributing value and worth to children on the basis of their subscription to

⁵ In sharing this experience, OA demonstrates the importance of separating exclusion as a techno-bureaucratic process from exclusion as a more loosely defined interaction concerning the quality of relationships in the classroom. This is an important point as despite legal and policy guidance, 'exclusion' describes more than a formal process of removing a child from a classroom or the school. Throughout this chapter, I deliberately move across this understanding of exclusion as a techno-bureaucratic process and as describing the quality of relationships in the classroom to demonstrate the complexity of this practice and its entanglement within understandings of care.

adult defined norms of acceptability and desirability is an example of systemic childism in the school system (Adami, 2024); such views undermine children's intrinsic value as human beings and their right to access education.

The work of Eva Kittay (1999) provides a bridge between ideas of desirable subjectivity and theories of care under neoliberal capitalism. In doing so, her work provides a foundation for further insight into why children who require more time and resources to achieve academic success are not considered valuable in the mainstream setting. Kittay (1999) writes about the 'dependency critique', arguing that despite dependency being an inherent feature of humanity, dependency and caring for dependents is not valued in a society that promotes individualism. This idea is useful for two reasons. Firstly, children depend upon their teachers to provide them with an education and safe environment to learn, some children with SEND may also require additional time and resources in order to achieve their potential. Secondly, if children's educational, social and emotional needs are to be met by teachers, teachers must assume the role of 'dependency worker' (ibid.) and such a role necessitates a display of care for the dependant. Yet despite this, it is becoming apparent that the English school system operates on transactional terms, "teachers don't feel as worried about giving them leniency if they're gonna get a grade out if it at the end" (PJ). Key to Kittay's dependency critique is the idea that a relationship involving dependency and care for another *cannot* be transactional as the dependent may never be in the position to repay the care displayed to them. This research project demonstrates the impossibility of caring for *all* children within a school system that is ultimately transactional and demands that all attention, time and resources are devoted to ensuring that the overall academic attainment produced by the school is as high as

possible. Thus the role of ‘dependency workers’, who focus on meeting the holistic care needs of children, is devalued, while competition between schools is facilitated and children are positioned as more or less ‘valuable’ based on their ability to engage in this competitive system.

6.3 Legitimising care

In discussing how value and worth is assigned to some children but not others, it is important to consider the role that medicalisation plays in this politics of care. Daniels (2006) and Slee (2011) argue that children are medicalised and labelled in order to solve the problems of adults, to justify calls for specialist intervention in a marketised school system where attention has to be focused on the academic results of the majority. In such circumstances, the disabled child is considered dangerous in mainstream schooling. Similar arguments are made by Harwood and Allan (2014:98) who note that excluded children are commonly medicalised and pathologized in the school system while being positioned as presenting a “risk and danger” to the classroom environment. Importantly, the risk and danger is located within the child, particularly poor and racially minoritized children, and therefore diverts attention away from considering the role that the school and wider society played in this construction of the child as dangerous.

Throughout my conversations with both education professionals and parents, it became clear that while exclusion, in all of its forms, was frequently discussed in terms of ‘unmet need’ rather than an explicit individualised deficit, this unmet need was usually considered in terms of a medical label or disorder. The most common examples of this

were autism, ADHD, persistent demand avoidance and non-descript social and emotional disorders. However, the purpose that this label served for a child and the level of care it encouraged was contested by my participants. According to classroom teacher, QP, assigning a medical label to a child and obtaining an EHCP is a way to ensure more compassion is displayed towards the child where they do behave outside of normative expectations. QP even went as far as to say that an EHCP can safeguard children from exclusionary discipline

“I do think they [EHCPs] safeguard children, if they have got an EHCP because staff can clearly see then can't they? Whereas if you don't fully understand what's going on then you might see 'oh that's just behaviour' rather than seeing it as an unmet need and I guess that's probably due to lack of training and understanding and lack of regular training on behaviour as well. So in my eleven years, I have had two meetings linked to understanding behaviour, so if you think about all the new teachers coming through that are finding it tough, I suppose that is lack of knowledge, lack of training, lack of understanding really.”

(QP – Classroom Teacher)

During the interview, I followed up this statement from QP with a question about whether a child having an EHCP encourages the adults around them to display more compassion towards disabled children, she replied with the following

“Yeah, I hate to say it but I would say so yeah. Not for me personally because I am very SEN based anyway, but knowing staff collectively, yes, definitely.” (QP – Classroom Teacher)

Adami's (2024) writing on ableist normativity is useful when analysing QP's observations regarding the mobilisation of care and compassion towards children with an EHCP. She writes that while a diagnosis of need is often well intentioned, it can mask social reasons for a child's behaviour such as, a school environment that is not inclusive or conducive to learning and the impact of living in poverty. Therefore, without explicitly evoking deficit ideology, the child is once again positioned as the 'problem' and the care available to them only exists in the form of medicalisation and diagnosis. Furthermore, Adami (2024) argues that 'mental disorders' in children are defined against Western understandings of expected development for a child. These normative, and importantly measurable, constructions of an 'ideal child' make it easier to attach a medical label to any child who 'deviates' from this Western norm. Importantly, it also has implications for which children are considered to be legitimate care subjects, and how care is conceptualised and mobilised in the school setting. Educational psychologist, HJ, recalled how children in her local authority were made vulnerable to exclusion where they required support for their mental health but did not meet the threshold for diagnosis as set out by the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

"in our LA we have a CAMHS service that will only work with children who have a diagnosable mental health need, it's a disorder. Whereas what we know from children is that they don't need that, most aren't there but that doesn't mean that they are not experiencing significant mental health need. And there is the difference, schools see this significant mental health need and put into CAMHS but CAMHS say it doesn't meet their threshold and criteria because they are a function of their environment and so then they're

done. So we have these kids that have nothing, they're just suffering” (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

In the circumstances described by HJ, the child is positioned as simultaneously requiring more care than the school is able to provide but also not in need of care from mental health specialists. Furthermore, HJ reveals the presence of a pathologizing approach to care in schools whereby referring a child to mental health specialists is perceived as the only way to meet their needs. This conflicts with the view of CAMHs who perceive the child as being “a function of their environment” and therefore an inappropriate candidate for specialist mental health intervention. What can be seen here is what happens when a child sits just outside of medical and social understandings of what a legitimate care subject should look like and the space they should occupy – they “have nothing, they’re just suffering” (HJ). Social understandings of what a primary school pupil should be do not provide the space for a child to present with mental health needs. Such needs do not fit into the accepted discourse of ‘normal child’ or ‘acceptable learner’. The child therefore becomes pathologized, medicalised and labelled, leaving them exposed to the intersectional invisibility that comes with ableism and childism. This therefore opens up the potential for the adults providing their education to develop deficit assumptions about their capacities and abilities. Returning to the discussion in the previous section, any diversion from normative understandings of a ‘desirable’ learner renders a child less valuable to the school that must relentlessly pursue better learner outcomes. As a result, the child is positioned as beyond the boundaries of care available in the mainstream school environment. The work of Slee (2013) is useful here. He suggests that due to a focus on performance and accountability, teachers are encouraged to adopt a ‘collective

indifference' regarding the treatment of disabled children in mainstream classrooms. Slee (ibid.) argues that a key catalyst for this collective indifference is the idea that teaching disabled children necessitates professional knowledge that mainstream educators do not have. Both QP and HJ demonstrate this where they refer to teachers requiring additional training on SEN/D and schools perceiving meeting mental health needs as beyond their capability. As such, care for children who exist outside of normative conceptualisations of the 'desirable' or 'acceptable' learner is positioned further outside the boundaries of mainstream education, and their exclusion is provided with an air of legitimacy.

Despite this, the parents I interviewed expressed the view that a formal diagnosis of need would protect their children from exclusion.

"they wouldn't have found it so easy to exclude him [if he had a diagnosis of autism], and certainly if he had had an EHCP I would have argued as a parent that they weren't accommodating his needs at all. I know they weren't but I have to be fair to the school, they have lots of pupils and only limited resources, there is only so much they can do in reality. I certainly felt that they could have done a lot more in my son's case" (VB – Parent)

"So I think, a lot of the time it was difficult for the school to accept that he might have a disability, which of course he has. I suppose, to be fair to them, he hadn't got his diagnosis at that point, had he got the diagnosis and they were aware, it may have been a very different story, but he didn't. They didn't know, we didn't know" (OA – Parent)

"there's always this balance isn't there that people don't want to label their child in case it affects their future but I just thought that clearly he needed some help, he needed an

assessment, if he has something on his record that shows he can't cope in school then at least that means it may help with getting him an assessment. So that's why we encouraged them to exclude formally" (WM – Parent)

The accounts of parents provided above all refer to a time prior to their children receiving a diagnosis of autism. In fact, VB's son was still awaiting his diagnosis at the time of interviewing. Interestingly, these parents appeared to perceive diagnosis as a potential safeguard from exclusion. While the statistics on primary school exclusions in the West Midlands demonstrate that this is clearly not the case, it is interesting to observe how these parents, with no prior knowledge of how exclusion works, believed that their children would be more easily positioned as legitimate care subjects and treated with more compassion if they had a diagnosed disability. Unfortunately, what these parents had failed to consider and/or were not aware of, was the policy, political and social context within which education resides and how having a diagnosed special educational need served to further position their child as 'Other' and therefore further outside the boundaries of caring practice. Youdell (2006a:99) claims that while classifications of special educational needs no longer include offensive terms that imply a child is incapable of learning, these terms "are silently invoked as the impossible learner is inscribed". The children of my participants were all pushed further into the position of "impossible learner" when they were diagnosed (or suspected) as having special educational needs, as is evidenced by their subsequent exclusions. Examples of this can be seen in the previous chapter where the intersection of ableism and childism is discussed. While the parents may have believed that a diagnosis or label would secure more support for their child and protect them from exclusion, the subsequent exclusion

of OA's and WM's children even after diagnosis – and the exclusion of thousands of children with a diagnosed SEND each year – demonstrates that while medicalisation may indeed open a child up to more 'care' from specialised mental health agencies, educational exclusion will always be relentlessly pursued within a policy environment that focuses on competition, results and an unquestioned acceptance of alternative provision (Slee and Allan, 2001).

6.4 Exclusion to maintain 'standards'

A common argument that is used in defence of school exclusion is that it is the only way to protect the education of the other children in the classroom. This argument is afforded a degree of credibility due to the wording of DfE (2024a:13) exclusions guidance which states that permanent exclusions should only be used “in response to a serious breach or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy; and *where allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others in the school*” (my emphasis). This approach towards the use of exclusion was echoed in the experiences of the education professionals taking part in my research, even those who disagreed with the use of exclusion and did not see it as an effective disciplinary technique.

“sometimes I think it's for the greater good as well because you have to think about the other children in the class and how their education might well be disturbed, impacted on and if that's on a regular, daily basis then there needs to be steps to make that decision to change something” (LO – Behaviour Support/Classroom Teacher)

“I think it's better to give the rest of the children in the class the right to a safe education and remove one child that's not following the norm and for whatever reason can't follow it and better to remove the education of another” (AS – Classroom Teacher)

“But it's really difficult isn't it, you always know that if a child gets permanently excluded then that will be damaging for their life chances and it's always trying to find the balance between what is right for that child and what is right for all the other children” (GS – Lecturer on Primary PGCE)

“There are so many factors involved and we're seeing more children presenting with SEND, which again, makes things difficult because you don't want to pre-judge someone or for them to be discriminated against because of their additional needs but then you've got to balance that with protecting staff and other children.” (SJ – Governance Professional)

In all of the interview extracts above, decision making about which children are more deserving of an education, and even future life chances, can be observed. However, it is in SJ's comment that a specific reference to children with SEND is made. In this statement, SJ makes clear the impact of having an approach to inclusive education that is based on equality rather than equity. SJ's comment demonstrates the concerns raised by Adami (2023) regarding having a rights-based approach to challenging childism where she argues that while the UNCRC is helpful and important, granting children equality of access to education is not the same as ensuring that children do not face discrimination and prejudice in the educational setting. I am not suggesting that SJ is deliberately advocating for discrimination against children with SEND, far from it, her comment

demonstrates an awareness of the intention to be inclusive. This theme of intentionality is also reflected above where classroom teacher, QP, discusses how a lack of knowledge regarding SEN can lead to misinterpretations of behaviour manifesting from unmet needs as being deliberately malicious or naughty. However, it is clear that despite intentions, decisions are still being made about which children more easily occupy the position of ‘impossible’ pupil (Youdell, 2006a).

Similar constructions of impossibility can be observed in an interview extract from deputy headteacher, JP who recalled a meeting with the parent of an excluded child and their advocate

“I have often had parents saying, where their child is the issue, 'oh yeah but their needs are different, they have different needs' and I'm like, yeah they have got different needs to the other 29 children in the class and they are different but they are no more important, just different. Sometimes when you say that to them they're like [mimics shocked face]. I remember a meeting with one of the boys that was regularly being excluded, dad bought a friend with him as like an advocate to support him and he started the meeting with the exclusion letter in his hand going 'this isn't the answer!' [shakes paper around to imitate the actions of the advocate], his child was in that class as well and he was a professional man, a social worker maybe, and I said to him, 'let me stop you there, I know this young man has different needs and is experiencing some challenges, but his needs are no different or more important than the other 29 children in the class' and you could see almost the guy go 'OH!' and the penny dropped.” (JP – Deputy Head)

Lynch (2022:106) provides a way for us to understand why these educators, who profess to be inclusive in their practice, do not perceive their actions as discriminatory - “both the habitual and institutionalized expressions of inferiority or superiority attributed to given groups are so normalized that they are invisible to the privileged and accepted by the subordinated”. Part of the reason for this, Lynch argues, is because the law has at one time permitted such group-based exclusions and thus they have become institutionalized. Applying these ideas to inclusive education and returning to the work of Slee (1998; 2011) it can be seen that schooling and education policy has long preferred describing some children as ‘defective’ over interrogating the exclusionary mechanisms that operate in schools, specifically through and emerging from, the education market. Furthermore, educators are working in the context of “a state which actively and passively enacts policies that diminish the quality of disabled people’s lives” (Pluquaillec and O’Connor, 2023:170).

Throughout the interviews I conducted, my participants spoke of the necessity to protect the education of the ‘Other 29’⁶. Exclusion was positioned as a legitimate way to achieve this, with discrimination invisibilized by the surface-level rationality and wide-spread acceptance of such an argument (Lynch, 2022). I argue that this perspective demonstrates a concern regarding the maintenance of standards in education. By protecting the education of the ‘desirable’ pupils – where this concept has been expanded to include a consideration of ableist normativity - the school are able to focus their limited

⁶ This argument is commonly used in defence of school exclusion with the idea being that schools should protect the education of the majority of children in a classroom by excluding the child that is perceived as being disruptive.

resources on children perceived as having the potential to attain grades that will preserve or enhance the school's league table position. Quotes included in the [previous chapter](#) demonstrate that this is a matter of concern for primary school headteachers in the Midlands. Furthermore, with Ofsted (2019) now considering the behaviour and attitudes of pupils as part of their inspection, ensuring only children who subscribe to the norms of behaviour remain in school, at the expense of children who do not, is becoming an increasingly attractive proposition. There are two important elements at play here, a conscious awareness of the need to compete in the education market and to make the school attractive to potential new parents/customers (explored further [here](#)), and the positioning of education for children with SEND as less important than the education of children without SEND. I argue that it is this social and policy context that contributes to my participants unthinkingly constructing children with SEND as 'Other' and their education as less important.

There is also something to be said about societal attitudes to vulnerability and dependency that are demonstrated here. My participants described some children as the 'issue' and referenced making the decision to exclude rather than accommodate difference. Such comments demonstrate Kittay's (1999:96) assertion that dependency and care work are commonly regarded as oppressive in societies that do not pay attention to the value that dependency can give to our lives. Under neoliberal capitalism, self-responsibilisation is key, and institutional norms and values are dominated by themes of individual responsibility, resilience and meritocracy (Lynch, 2022). Therefore, where children have different needs and require more support, not only are they not appropriately performing the role of ideal neoliberal citizen, but they are also threatening

“productivity (profit) by ...needing care” (Lynch, 2022:38). All of this is providing an air of legitimacy, even rationality, to the exclusion of children with SEND in order to ‘protect’ the education of ‘desirable pupils’, even in schools that claim to be inclusive.

6.5 Safeguarding the ‘Other 29’

Throughout the discussion so far, I have presented the multiple ways in which some children are constructed as ‘Other’ and positioned as less deserving of care. However, it is also important to examine how the child considered to be ‘Other’ is also constructed as dangerous. Therefore, the techno-bureaucratic process of exclusion is not only positioned as a technique to ensure security in response to insecurity, as above, but as a tool to keep children and adults physically and emotionally safe.

Many of the education professionals and parents I interviewed viewed school exclusion as a way to ensure physical safety, specifically positioning exclusion as an effective and necessary tool for protecting the safety of the majority.

“I think the sole purpose is safety, if they feel like they can't keep the child safe, the other children safe or the staff safe, that is the reason, that is the purpose” (SJ – Governance Professional)

“So if you have a class of 30 children and you have one disruptive pupil or someone that is putting the other pupils in danger, something has to be done because those other 29 children, they have the right to feel safe haven't they? and to have a good education, and to feel happy and be calm.” (QP – Classroom Teacher)

“I think there are very extreme circumstances where the child is not safe or the other children are not safe and it's not the right setting for them. I think all of the other things should be in place and exclusion should be the absolute last resort, I do see a place for it if the behaviour is that extreme and the other children are in danger” (KH – Classroom Teacher)

“That perm ex that I talked about, the TA had done wonders for this child and he physically attacked her, well that can't be the case, you can't have that. If you were in the NHS and you attacked a nurse or doctor you would be out, so why should schools be any different? Often they're not” (JP – Deputy Headteacher)

“What a headteacher will say is that they're safeguarding their staff, and there is something to be said for that, if you we're going into work each day and being assaulted and abused, it's not OK. And so, if you haven't got the environment around you that manages it well, and that's the problem the systems aren't set up in some of these schools to manage it and therefore you get this behaviour and you get exclusion as a way to manage it. You will see schools that exclude less have more going on and more support” (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

While the education professionals I interviewed generally viewed exclusion as a last resort, they thought it should be engaged with more readily where the education, well-being or physical safety of the Other 29 children or staff was perceived to be at threat. Interestingly, HJ and JP spoke of safety specifically in reference to the safety of school staff, yet their explanations and justifications for exclusions under these circumstances differed. Educational Psychologist, HJ, drew upon her professional experience when

explaining that while she did recognise the importance of protecting school staff from abuse, exclusion and the behaviours preceding it could be avoided if schools had access to adequate resources to support children at risk of exclusion. She therefore saw exclusion as something that was only used where effective support was unavailable and behaviour management had failed. On the other hand, Deputy Headteacher, JP, viewed exclusion as the only suitable response to violent behaviour, arguing that if the NHS has a zero-tolerance approach to abuse then so should schools. While physical safeguarding may at first appear to be a legitimate justification for exclusion use, if exclusion is to be understood through a social justice lens then a critical consideration of how and where safeguarding is evoked must be considered. By discussing exclusion in terms of safety, the cause and solution to the perceived problem is located within the child, preventing the opportunity to examine violence exhibited by young children as a systemic issue while simultaneously ignoring the “material structures and circumstances that cultivated and allowed such violence to take place within a school environment” (NME, n.d:18). This locating of the problem within the child can be observed in the experiences of parents interviewed as part of this research project. While they acknowledged that there were multiple reasons that contributed to the exclusion of their children, safeguarding and safety became a common theme amongst them.

“I think if you have a really disruptive child and he really really was, he would throw things, he would be violent, he would shout and scream. So the school also have the other children's safety to think about as well, so we kinda got that. We knew that was part of it, but there was no "ok, what's going on, why and how can we help", it was more "let's get rid of him because he's a bit of a disaster"”(WM – Parent)

“They were guaranteed to get that response from him and that's what they did every time. And because he's hit them, he shouldn't do that obviously and I'm not condoning it, but they used that to justify his exclusion for two days, but then that became three day, four days, five days and so on.” (VB – Parent)

When I asked UH what the reason for her son's exclusion was, she said

“That he had been naughty, safeguarding reasons they couldn't keep him in school and I would have to come and pick him up. It got to the point in mainstream where he was there for an hour a day and I had to be in the school for that hour with him [exasperated laugh], it was pretty bad” (UH – Parent)

Although safeguarding policies are supposed to keep children safe, the experiences of these parents demonstrate that the very same policies can also lead to feelings of frustration, mistrust and shame amongst those positioned as a risk to the safety of the group. Maslaha (n.d) identify these feelings as being symptoms of harm. In addition to safeguarding policies evoking feelings that are symptomatic of harm, research evidence shows that excluding children often also exposes them to real danger. Just for Kids Law (2020) claim that excluded children are more vulnerable to child criminal exploitation, and a recent investigation by the BBC (2023) has shown this to be a particular issue in the West Midlands. With this in mind, it is necessary to engage with a critical questioning of permanent exclusion and suspension that is used in the name of safeguarding. This reasoning for exclusion, perhaps unintentionally, positions some children as less deserving of care and protection, as a risk to the safety of others rather than deserving of safety themselves. It is therefore important to think about *who* these children are and why

they are regarded as dangerous. While many of the education professionals did not provide a description of the children they were referring to when discussing exclusion for safeguarding reasons, JP did discuss this in reference to the permanent exclusion of a Black Caribbean boy with SEND that he recalled earlier in the interview. Furthermore, all of the parents were sharing their own experiences of how exclusions were used towards their autistic children. Apple and Zenk's (1996:69) concept of 'pathological analysis' is useful here. With the exception of HJ, none of the education professionals discussed the use of exclusion for safeguarding reasons in the context of the support that the school was able to provide. Additionally, the contributions of parents demonstrate how their children's schools used 'safeguarding' as a way to position the children themselves as the cause of the problem in school – WM's experience makes this very clear in her recollection of how the school's response to safeguarding concerns surrounding her son positioned him as a "bit of a disaster", therefore pathologizing him rather than considering him to be a child in need of support. It seems irreconcilable for 'safeguarding' to be considered as actively harmful and discriminatory, as Lynch (2022:137) states, "[i]t is the contradictions and incoherence of ideologies that make challenging them all the more difficult. They proclaim credible principles that few could discount (including efficiency, equality of opportunity and rewarding effort), while concealing the institutional and structural processes and practices that undermine the very principles they profess". However, the 'credible principle' being discussed here, the safety of children, is arguably more powerful than those raised by Lynch.

As has already been stated, the children disproportionately exposed to primary school exclusion are those who are poor, racially minoritised, disabled and have experience of

the social care system. Importantly, safeguarding practice also constitutes children belonging to these groups as ‘risky’ or ‘at risk’ while ignoring how risk is “socially, culturally and politically made” (Vaughn, 2019:9). Drawing again on Lynch, the credible principles of keeping children safe here conceal institutional discrimination that serves to disproportionately produce harm for certain groups of children. Moreover, not only does this pathologization conceal harm, it also legitimises it, “the demonising and pathologizing tendency is an essential step in legitimising inaction or punitive responses, with respect to school exclusion” (Parsons, 2005:195). It is on this basis that I argue this approach to ‘safeguarding’ in the context of primary school exclusions is, on occasion, being used to shut down legitimate questions about the willingness and ability of schools to appropriately support *all* children in the institution, as well as excuse decisions made about which children/adults in the school should be safeguarded and from whom. These decisions are not neutral, but entangled within a complex web of discussions regarding which children are valuable to the school, which children subscribe to expectations of the acceptable learner, which children pose a threat to the dominant culture of the school and which children are more easily positioned as “a bit of a disaster”. The co-option of safeguarding legislation to simultaneously ensure the care of some children while obstructing the care of others (disproportionately those from marginalised groups), provides additional justification to Lynch’s assertion that care must be considered through the lens of social justice.

6.6 Meritocratic conceptualisations of care

Constructions of which children are ‘Other’ and therefore less valuable/welcome in the mainstream school setting appear to be further reinforced by parents of non-excluded children attending mainstream primary schools. The contributions of education professionals taking part in this research reveal that these constructions are somewhat rooted in a sense of scarcity regarding the resources available to a school as well as ideas about which children are more worthy of care and the aforementioned limited resources. Local authority inclusion officer, CP, made this clear when describing how primary schools have to contend with an ‘army’ of parents who want to see action being taken towards children who are perceived as either harming the education or physical well-being of their own children.

“at primary level you've also got parent pressures to deal with far more as well because their little babies are coming home and saying what's going on in the class and you almost get that that army of parents who are coming in and going "what are you gonna do about this child, you've gotta support me, my child is coming home with bumps and bruises or complaining about not learning", there's that side of it. Schools will get to a point where they feel they have to act because they can't just let it go anymore.” (CP – LA Inclusion Officer)

This experience was corroborated by educational psychologist, IB and classroom teacher, QP, when they were asked what factors may influence a schools decision to exclude a child

“Pressure from other parents who their kids have been affected by the behaviour of the child. I think that is definitely something school staff say to me, they are having daily complaints from parents” (IB - Educational Psychologist)

“I would say pressure from other parents in your classes. For example, if you have a child that has got identified SEMH needs, or even if they haven't, if there is significant behaviour that is recurrent, that is an impact on the other children and so very often other children will be communicating with their parents and parents will then come in and want to see some form of action for a behaviour, or if there has been an incident between two children or if there has been an incident between children and adults, they will very often need to know that something significant has happened. So there's definitely an external pressure there from other parents” (QP - Primary School Teacher)

In an education system and society where individualism and meritocratic selection are so normalised and accepted as key to success, there is little room for care and compassion (Lynch, 2022). These quotes demonstrate how the capacity of schools to care for children who are displaying behaviours that place them at risk of exclusion is further reduced where parents buy into, and mobilise, the values of individual responsibility and meritocracy. I argue that it is within this space that a fear and awareness of the ‘impossible’ pupil, so easily constructed as ‘Other’, has further potential to become a catalyst for exclusionary practices in the school setting. Maguire, et al., (2010) also identify a relationship between parental power, ‘safety’ in schools and behaviour policies. Noting, like my participants, that school leaders are aware of the external pressures from parents to ensure that safety and order are top of the agenda. Building upon Maguire, et

al., (2010:154), I argue that this demand from parents for schools to ensure “safe and orderly environments”, while not in itself unreasonable, contributes to responsabilizing individual children for perceived misbehaviour. Importantly, where parents demand that a child should be excluded so that their own children are ‘protected’ from this perceived threat, they are not only insisting on a safe school environment for their child, but mobilising their social, economic and cultural capital in a way that actively contributes to the ‘Othering’ of a child that is already disproportionately likely to be marginalized in some way. I am not suggesting that these parents are setting out with the intention to ensure the removal of children from school who do not fit the ‘norm’; such demands are being made out of a display of care for their own children who so often do align with understandings of ‘acceptable’ learner subjectivity.

Having said this, a question still remains as to why parents demand the exclusion of the ‘impossible learner’, perceived as obstructing their child’s access to education, rather than campaigning for system-wide reform that ensures a higher standard of inclusive education for all. I have two explanations for this. Firstly, drawing upon Lynch’s (2022) use of Adorno’s (2005) concept of ‘bourgeois coldness’ I suggest that the longstanding discourse of meritocracy endemic in political and social life, characteristic of neoliberal capitalism, has encouraged an attitude of indifference towards the interests and care of others, while encouraging self-interested pursuits. Particularly amongst those who hold more power and status in society, these people have the “most to gain from exercising indifference towards the vulnerable other” (Lynch, 2022:38). When thinking about schooling, encouraging the exclusion of the ‘vulnerable other’, who may be requiring more

time and attention from the teacher, parents are able to free up resources for their own children. Such a distribution of resources was demonstrated by TJ

“the purpose exclusion served in our case was kind of two-fold in that it benefitted the school in the short term because they could use the resources that were for my child to support more children when he wasn't there. So one TA that was dedicated to my son, if he wasn't there, would be supporting a group of 10. So that is one purpose that was served, if I'm being a bit cold about it” (TJ – Parent)

Secondly, Ahmed's (2004) work on the cultural politics of fear is useful for understanding such self-interested pursuits. While Ahmed's chapter on fear focuses on race and racism, particularly concerning the racism displayed towards people who are migrating to a different country from where they were born, her ideas can be applied to the presence of children with SEND in mainstream primary schools. Ahmed (2004:76) talks about how the politics of fear often involves the language of 'floods', 'invasions' and being overwhelmed by 'inappropriate others' which contribute to an ontology of insecurity. Within this ontology, “it *must* be presumed that things are not secure, in and of themselves, in order to justify the imperative to *make things secure*” (original emphasis). A look at headlines published in recent years can help to shed some light on why there may be a presumption amongst parents that things are not secure and all is not well in schools.

“Too many children' going for SEND assessments, council boss claims” (Times Educational Supplement, 2019)

“Spiralling SEND transport budgets threaten financial sustainability of England's largest councils, report reveals” (County Councils Network, 2023)

“One in 10 pupils in England have missed school because they felt unsafe – survey” (The Guardian, 2023)

“Exclusive: Pupil behaviour getting worse, say most teachers” (Times Educational Supplement, 2023)

“9 in 10 teachers say Ofsted is not ‘reliable’ or ‘valid’” (Times Educational Supplement, 2023)

While it may not be the intention, such headlines reinforce this ontology of insecurity and contribute to the creation of an environment whereby parents feel insecure about the education their child is receiving. Therefore, a fear emerges, a fear directed towards those who are more easily positioned as ‘Other’. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, this ‘Other’ is commonly the child who does not fit into discursive constructions of the ‘acceptable/desirable pupil/learner’. Drawing upon Ahmed (2004), one way of quashing that fear/ perceived insecurity is to lean into the idea that more surveillance and punishment is needed. In schools this presents as exclusionary practices perhaps motivated by parents demanding that the ‘Other’ is punished in order to protect the education of ‘desirable pupils’. Through acting in this way, parents are able to feel as though they have once again “ma[de] things secure” (Ahmed, 2004:76).

Importantly, drawing upon Lynch’s (2022) writing on ideologies of meritocracy under neoliberal capitalism, I argue that this fear of the undeserving ‘Other’ potentially taking up scarce resources is emboldened by a view that everything in the school, including care, should be meritocratically distributed. The myth of meritocracy has long been a component of English education policy and society more broadly, used to justify unequal outcomes under the guise that every child has an equal opportunity to success (ibid.).

This cannot be untangled from the idea that education has now become a product to be consumed (Apple, 2006) and this commodification of education exists alongside a commodification of care (Lynch, 2022). I am not arguing that parents' voices should not be heard where they have concerns about their child's education or safety in the school. However, it is apparent from the contributions of education professionals involved in this project that commonly, this raising of concerns results in the exclusion of the often, vulnerable, 'Other'. The exclusion of and discrimination towards certain children are therefore legitimised where schools give in to parental pressure without engaging in a wider conversation about the importance of promoting the safety and education of *all* children in the setting. Thus, meritocratic conceptualisations of how care and resources should be distributed are able to develop. As a result, the means and justification for a segregated education system, facilitated by exclusion, are provided.

This section has so far focused on parents mobilising their power as 'consumers' of education to demand that the disruptive 'Other' is removed. In doing so, they encourage a meritocratic distribution of care, where some children are positioned as being more worthy of care than others. While my focus here is still on parents, my research found that these meritocratic distributions of care are also supported and enacted by school leadership. This was demonstrated by my interview with deputy headteacher, JP, who discussed the presence of 'good' children and families, linking them to the maintenance of school finances

"a headteacher or SLT fear would be losing 'good' children and families because, well, I don't want my child to be in that class." (JP – Deputy Headteacher)

I followed this statement up with a question about whether this fear of losing ‘good’ children and families was also linked to school finances, he responded with the following *“Oh 100%, especially now, 100%. Massively, you know, census day was in October and our funding for next year is based on the children who are on roll on that day, so yeah, massively.” (JP – Deputy Headteacher)*

These comments can be analysed through the concept of the ‘care penalty’, developed by feminist economist, Nancy Folbre. Folbre (2017) uses this term to explain how individuals working in caring professions, including teaching, face economic disadvantages because care work is not valued in a capitalist society. This notion of a care penalty can be built upon by examining the connection that deputy headteacher, JP, made between school exclusion use and school finances. JP’s experience demonstrates that the care penalty does not only apply to individuals, but also to the school as an institution. When making the decision to exclude a child, schools must carefully consider whether a commitment to inclusion, defying the demands of the consumer parents, is worth risking the financial situation of the school. In these circumstances, schools may face a care penalty where committing to inclusion leads to groups of unhappy parents removing their children from the school – if this exodus occurs before census day, the school will face significant financial implications as a result of the per pupil funding model that schools currently contend with. By explaining these circumstances, JP makes clear that while individuals in schools do want to include and care for all children, their capacity to care is obstructed by bureaucracy regarding how schools are funded.

Furthermore, in this discussion about factors influencing exclusion use, JP referred to a fear of losing ‘good’ children and families. By asserting a moral judgment of children and families, JP demonstrates how schools are also engaged in the meritocratic distribution of care, perpetuating the idea that some children are more deserving of care than others. The deputy headteacher did not explain what he meant by the word ‘good’. However, given the description of ‘good behaviour’ provided in DfE policy (DfE, 2024d), it could reasonably be suggested that he was using good as a synonym for a child that adheres to the school rules and norms. Importantly, research also indicates that teacher perceptions of good behaviour are influenced by the ethnicity (Owens, 2023), gender (Glock, 2016), social class and SEN status of the child (Dunne and Gazeley, 2008). The aforementioned research provides evidence that Black children are commonly perceived as more ‘blameworthy’ than white children for identical displays of misbehaviour (Owens, 2023); this is particularly apparent where the child is male. Glock’s (2016) research demonstrates that this intersecting identity exposes male, ethnic minority children to harsher and more frequent interventions to curtail behaviour perceived as disruptive. The work of Gazeley and Dunne (2008) demonstrates how working class children, particularly those with a diagnosis of SEN, are perceived by teachers as being more disruptive and having a poor attitude towards learning. While the data collected as part of this research project does not allow me to claim that such factors influence a teacher’s view of which children are more deserving of care, it would be interesting to explore in further research whether this is indeed the case.

Despite this, Deputy Headteacher, JP, did speak of wanting to ensure that ‘good children’ from ‘good *families*’ remain at his school. While he does not explicitly reference the

ethnicity or social class of the families referenced here, or indeed the SEN status and gender of the child, it does suggest that constructions of which children are deserving of care at the mainstream setting are somewhat tied up with the biographical discourses that the child occupies. By talking about 'good families', JP moves the focus away from the specific behaviour of the child. Therefore, demonstrating that constructions of which children belong at the school are not solely dependent upon how the child acts. Consequently, Ahmed's (2004) scholarship on fear again becomes relevant as JP demonstrates how the financial insecurity that schools have to contend with also feeds into decisions about exclusion use. From this perspective, the techno-bureaucratic process of exclusion provides security in two ways. Firstly, it can be used to ensure that only 'valuable'/'desirable'/'good' children are kept on the school roll. Therefore making the school more attractive to potential parents through the production of positive examination results and Ofsted gradings. Secondly, it can be used to encourage 'good' families to keep their children at the school with the promise that any 'undesirable' children, those constructed as 'Other', will be removed. Excluding one child to prevent the exodus of multiple 'good' children appears to be a logical step when faced with financial insecurity.

6.7 'Bad' mothers and their 'bad' children

In the process of conducting interviews, a discussion of exclusionary practice emerged that I was not expecting. It centred around the mothers of excluded children or children at risk of exclusion and how they are implicated within a child's vulnerability to exclusion. While it does not necessarily speak to the techno-bureaucratic process of exclusion, it

provides important insight when considering how exclusion also implicates the quality of relationships in and adjacent to the classroom. In this regard, the work of Kittay (1999) is particularly useful for thinking more deeply about how children come to be positioned as at risk of exclusion. Kittay (1999) explains how mothers who dedicate time to fighting for their children's right to an education are often positioned by professionals as overbearing and neurotic, rather than appropriately caring. An example of this from my research can be seen in Deputy Headteacher, FI's, recollection of dealing with a child at risk of exclusion

"He [the excluded child] was an extreme case where he had, again a toxic mess of special needs, being excluded from other schools, an uncompliant mother, and what I mean by that is that she would not work with the school, she threatened to go to this and that person about it [the exclusion]. He ended up at a PRU and he smashed all the windows in the PRU" (FI – Deputy Headteacher/SEND CO)

In this short extract, FI describes the child's mother as being 'uncompliant', the implication being that she was not appropriately supporting her child because she was challenging the requests and advice given by various education professionals. As such, the excluded child's mother is being positioned as inappropriately performing the role of 'good mother'. At the same time, the politics of care being evoked in this interaction positions the education professionals as having the ultimate authority on 'good caring'. FI explains how the child in question 'ended up' at a pupil referral unit, a site of education notorious for producing poor outcomes for the children contained within. In making this connection between the 'uncompliant mother' and the pupil referral unit, FI positions the

mother as being somewhat at fault for her child's poor educational outcomes and therefore, inappropriately performing the role of 'good mother'. In post-industrial society, people are valued for their independence, rationality and self-sufficiency (Kittay, 1999). Furthermore, in a behaviourist dominated education system exclusionary discipline is regarded as an appropriate mechanism whereby children can be taught a valuable lesson about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (DfE, 2024a). Therefore, by being deeply involved in challenging the decision to exclude her child from the school, it could be argued that this mother is obstructing her child's access to the independence, rationality and self-sufficiency that may be obtained by experiencing exclusion.

In addition, by describing the child as having a 'toxic mess' which included his special educational needs *and* his mother's determination to challenge exclusionary practice, FI shifts some of the blame for the child 'ending up' in a PRU onto the mother. This shifting of blame onto mothers is not unusual (Kittay, 1999). The devaluing of dependency and dependency work in post-industrial society has been accompanied by welfare reforms that have removed support from those in need of assistance, and demonised those requesting additional help. An example of this can be seen in the reforms to the Universal Credit system whereby the ostensible aim was to 'make work pay' (DWP, 2013), this had significant negative financial implications for families of disabled children where parents are fulfilling the role of full-time carer and therefore unable to seek out paid employment, making them ineligible for Universal Credit. This was accompanied by a 50% reduction in the monthly payments made to parents of disabled children (Contact, n.d). Such reforms contribute to responsabilizing parents for their child's disability and in the words of Kittay (1999:176), "[j]ust as the poor are increasingly blamed for their poverty, so the mother of

a child with disability is often seen as responsible for that disability”. In other words, if dependency is to be a feature of society then someone must be to blame. While this child referred to by FI was eventually excluded from the school and enrolled into a pupil referral unit (PRU), it is not unreasonable to suggest that the process of exclusion began much earlier. This child, with his history of exclusion and diagnosed special educational need did not fit the mould of the ideal pupil from the outset, yet it seems that the quality of relationships the school have with the parents of a child are also a contributing factor to exclusionary practice. This is confirmed by another comment FI made when discussing the importance of teacher-parent relationships,

“If you wanted to get rid of a child and you didn't have that relationship [with their parents], I imagine it would be more easy than perhaps it should be” (FI – Deputy Headteacher/SENCO)

Findings from my research suggest that parents, particularly mothers, are often positioned as being to blame for their child's exclusion. The majority of parents I interviewed told me that they had been advised to attend parenting classes, OA's experience of this is provided below

“If I had known more [about the legality of exclusionary practice] I would have gone to Ofsted in the first place but I was in crisis too, I thought social services were going to come and take him off me, the school told me to go on parenting classes! I thought it was all me! The school got it into their head that he was having a mental health crisis probably due to something I was doing but it was nothing like that, he had communication needs that weren't being met!” (OA - Parent)

During the interview, OA explained to me that the school advised her to take her son to the accident and emergency department at the local hospital in order to address the ‘mental health crisis’ they had identified. During this visit, OA was reassured by the doctor and a member of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) that her son was not experiencing a mental health crisis, in fact, they suggested that he may be autistic. Following this encounter, OA returned to the school to discuss the potential of securing an EHCP for her son, she described the headteachers response as ‘dismissive’

“I had just had a meeting with the headteacher where I said "I think I want to look into an EHCP" and they basically laughed at me in this meeting, they were very dismissive” (OA – Parent)

Kittay (1999) asserts that mothers are commonly regarded as responsible for their child’s disability. The experience of OA and FI demonstrates that mothers are also positioned by education professionals as responsible for the ‘unacceptable’ behaviours displayed by their children, and thereafter, the exclusion of their child from mainstream education. Under these circumstances, little attention is paid to how the school contributes to a child’s vulnerability to exclusion. This is made clear where OA explains that the headteacher dismissed the suggestion that OA’s son may benefit from an EHCP – a document specifically designed to tell a school, and the educators within, how to meet a child’s needs to ensure their effective inclusion within the classroom. In dismissing the need for an EHCP and referring OA to parenting classes, the headteacher simultaneously responsibilized OA for her child’s struggles in the mainstream school while denying the possibility that his distress could have been caused by anything other than his mother’s

inability to effectively care for him. Importantly, in being so dismissive of her concerns, the headteacher also engaged in positioning this mother's concern as "overbearing neuroticism" (ibid., 94). While the quality of teacher-parent relationships should not influence the use of exclusion or attitudes towards children in the classroom, by dismissing this mother's concerns about unmet and undiagnosed special educational needs and recommending that she attend parenting classes, the school were able to legally engage in his exclusion. If his disability had been recognised and diagnosed earlier, OA could have legitimately challenged the exclusion process on the basis of disability discrimination. However, by placing the blame on the child's mother the structural and institutional discrimination that children face at school was able to remain hidden, and his removal from the premises was legitimised, at least as far as legal guidance on exclusion use is concerned. This attribution of blame allowed the boy and his mother to be constructed as troublesome, rather than in need of support. Returning to Ahmed (2004:76) and the politics of fear, engaging in exclusion allowed the school to once again "make things secure" by removing the child in crisis and the mother who had the potential to complain to Ofsted about the education and (lack of) care her son was receiving at school.

6.8 Compassion fatigue and the impossibility of relational care

So far in this chapter I have discussed how and why care for children constructed as 'Other' is restricted in mainstream primary education, demonstrating how children are made vulnerable to school exclusion. While the role of teachers in this process has been discussed, it is important to acknowledge that performing the role of 'good' teacher has

become increasingly difficult in recent years, and discontent within the profession has started to grow - as demonstrated by the teacher strikes that took place across England in January 2023 (Schools Week, 2023). Such factors are important to consider when attempting to understand why school exclusions are continuing to rise on an annual basis. Many of the education professionals taking part in this research project explained to me how difficult it is for them to 'pour from an empty cup', yet they are forced to do so and therefore exclusionary practices become attractive solutions when children themselves are positioned as the problem.

"I think exclusion rates are higher also because school staff are exhausted, we have burnout massively in our education system. We saw and acknowledged it in the health system, but we never acknowledged education. They were there through the school holidays, through lockdown, they have dealt with the pandemic and haven't had a break. So our teachers, their wellbeing is the lowest we have seen it, headteachers are leaving in their droves, so the tolerance level. When we think of stress and how much tolerance we have in a system, we have no tolerance at the moment because it's just too much for people. So that's another reason why you will see exclusion because actually, we're knackered and we have nothing else to give. So you're asking me to do this but I physically and mentally cannot do this for this young person, we have therefore got systems that are lacking and it's [exclusion] just easier, it relieves you immediately from a very difficult scenario. But we must not blame schools, it would be easy to do but they are a function of what Government has made them to be" (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

“As an NQT they are treading water the whole year. I sunk. I had to use the whole of Christmas to get back above water, trying to physically teach lessons, mark lessons, set work listen to every child read everyday and then oh I think that child might be suffering a little bit, do I know what to put in place? Well no because I've never had any training on it, that's where it all falls down. PGCE, exclusion was just totally overridden, we just didn't hear about it” (AS – Classroom Teacher)

“Staff are experiencing compassion fatigue where they're just tired and it's like, the quick fix is exclusion. It's harder to keep the pupil on and do all the work to keep them in school, it's a lot of effort on the part of staff. Sometimes, sadly, it can seem like the easier option” (RS – Assistant Educational Psychologist)

Similar sentiments to those raised in the interview extracts above were echoed by all of the education professionals taking part in this research, with many keen to emphasise the role that Government policy plays in their exhaustion and lack of ability to cater for the needs of all children in their schools. Kittay (1999:106) argues that a society that claims to care for its dependents by “exploiting the labour of those who do the caring cannot be said to be well ordered”. The impact of this exploitation of labour is made clear by my participants where they speak of exhaustion, sinking in response to overwhelming workloads and having nothing else to give. It is not fair or possible to expect educators to care to their greatest ability when the conditions of their employment are detrimental to their wellbeing. In a similar vein, Folbre (1994:250) suggests that “altruism does not emanate from our genes or fall from the sky. It is socially and culturally constructed, economically and politically reinforced”. At present, it seems that the conditions for

altruism to flourish are not present in the school system, with teachers' demands for education reform and wellbeing issues to be addressed being met with hostility by ex-Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan (Adams, 2023). It is therefore unsurprising to see that, according to assistant education psychologist, RS, educators are experiencing "compassion fatigue" - an attitude of indifference towards the harm done to and experienced by the children in their care. Under such circumstances, exclusionary practices are being positioned as the 'easier option'.

Importantly, it is here that a connection with childism can again be made. Changes to education policy have consistently added to the workload of those employed in schools but the impact of the intense requirement to perform, adapt to changing policy guidance, raise standards and compete with other schools, is felt not only by the educators but also the children. Yet, these changes have been held up by politicians as positive and necessary for cementing children's right to education (DfE and Gibb, 2016). However, Lynch (2022:114) argues that by "focusing on individual rights more than needs, the ways human neediness drives interdependency, moral purposes and the need for mutual care are made invisible". In other words, this focus on the individual's right to education has failed to ensure attention is dedicated to meeting children's needs (Adami, 2023). Such a prioritization is made evident where classroom teacher, AS shares the experience of her PGCE course focusing on curriculum content rather than adequately preparing her for dealing with children who may be 'suffering'. This liberal rights-based individualist approach to education is focused on academic outcomes and, therefore, the children who are regarded as more likely to achieve are more valuable to the school - this is considered to be fair where one buys into the idea that all children are provided with equal

resources to achieve. Importantly, this position on care prevents us from thinking more broadly and in a way that are more caring (Tronto, 2015). The findings presented here have highlighted the shortcomings of thinking about peoples lives only in terms of meritocracy and equality of opportunity, while contributing the conversation regarding how the “individualised liberal approach fails to address the ways in which racism, gender and ethnic biases, ableism and carelessness are integrated into the structures of institutions themselves” (Lynch, 2022:105). As a result of these systemic biases, the exclusion of children positioned as ‘Other’ becomes ever more possible, especially where teachers have ‘nothing else left to give’ and parents who challenge injustice are blamed for their children’s ‘neediness’ and referred to parenting classes. Compassion is being denied to all involved in the mainstream primary school system while politicians proudly announce that the “government’s unrelenting drive to raise school standards over the past 13 years” has led to England being “firmly cemented as one of the top performing countries for education in the western world” (DfE and Keegan, 2023).

6.9 Conclusion

The lived experiences of my participants have reconfirmed longstanding sociological research concerning the attribution of greater value to children who can be more easily positioned as the ‘acceptable’ or ‘desirable’ learner in a school system that overwhelmingly focuses on academic outcomes and competition. However, by taking into consideration the politics of care and caring under neoliberal capitalism my research findings have also shown that by viewing children through this transactional, human-capital based lens some children are not only ‘othered’ but positioned as being unworthy

and less deserving of care. By exploring how medicalisation, meritocratic approaches to caring, selective safeguarding and 'bad mothering' all play into decisions to exclude a child from the school, my research has shown how children considered to be 'at risk' of exclusion move from being an 'impossible' learner to a dangerous or risky child that has no place in the mainstream primary school environment.

7. THE VIOLENCE OF CO-OPTATION: CARE AND CARING IN A MARKET FOCUSED SCHOOL SYSTEM

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I primarily draw upon critical scholarship regarding education policy and caring in neoliberal capitalist society to examine how ‘care’ is being re-defined and co-opted as a mechanism of governance. In doing so, I demonstrate how the meaning of ‘care’ in schools has increasingly moved away from being understood as essential for fostering genuine affective relations. Drawing upon the contributions and experiences of my participants, I argue that this is a consequence of behaviourist focused education policy and a turn towards the pursuit of market agendas in schooling. In making this argument I draw upon Dadvand and Cuervo’s (2019) concept of ‘performative ethics of care’ to explain how care and caring in education have come to be understood as protecting a school’s reputation and place in the education market. By considering the experiences of education professionals and parents of excluded children, I demonstrate how this has had significant consequences regarding how and why exclusionary discipline is used in schools.

I use the term ‘governance’ in a similar way to Ball (2017) and Thomson (2020) who regard governance as a form of state control that is achieved through “steer[ing] from a distance” (Ball, 2017:49). This ‘steering’ involves the use of performance monitoring and targets to ensure that the everyday practices of institutions are moving in the desired direction of travel. Importantly, as is implied by the reference to distance, this steering is not directly enacted by central government but relies on a “constellation” (Thomson, 2020:54) of arms-length bodies to ensure government goals and practices are achieved and enacted.

In this chapter, I begin with a presentation of Ofsted as a key actor in the aforementioned constellation.

7.2 'Care' in a performance focused school

Throughout my interviews with education professionals it became clear that Ofsted were a particular site of concern and source of anxiety for those working in schools. The presence of Ofsted and the pressure to achieve desirable inspection outcomes appeared to negatively impact the ability and willingness of educators to engage with inclusive practice. In the current primary education system Ofsted inspection outcomes are incredibly important to schools. They are commonly interpreted as a “marker of success” (Lupton and Hayes, 2021), with schools often proudly displaying their ‘Outstanding’ or ‘Good’ inspection outcome on banners stretched across the public entrance for current and prospective parents to see. It could therefore be inferred that an ‘Outstanding’ school should be capable of meeting the needs of all of their pupils, caring for and educating each and every child that enters their building. After all, Ofsted inspections were in part designed to ‘raise standards’, as well as assist parents in the choosing of an appropriate school for their child (Elliot, 2012). Yet since its introduction, the effectiveness and potential harm caused by Ofsted has been documented and debated (Matthews and Smith, 1995; Jeffrey and Woods, 1996; Case, et al., 2000; Bokhove, et al., 2023). My participants explained how, in their experience, Ofsted influences decisions to exclude children from primary school

“I think with Ofsted, schools tend to fear Ofsted because of the damage they can do. Behaviour is a big issue in schools, if you have a child who you feel is going to put your school in a bad light then you may be encouraged to not want that child in your school anymore.” (MW – Behaviour Support/Classroom Teacher)

“Well, the schools that I've worked at have always gone above and beyond, they have never wanted to exclude, it has always been a last resort but when you can't get that support from elsewhere and you're constrained by this narrative that we have to abide by what Ofsted want, this tick-sheet almost, it's what do you do? You have to be seen to be responding to these behaviours” (QP – Classroom Teacher)

It is clear from the quotes above that Ofsted are feared by individuals within the school. Ofsted's embodiment of regulation, surveillance and behaviourism encourages educators to behave in ways that they may not be personally comfortable with – *“they have never wanted to exclude, it has always been a last resort but... we have to abide by what Ofsted want”*. Two of the parents I interviewed also recalled being asked not to bring their child into school on the day that Ofsted were scheduled to visit, in one case this request was made by a special school that a child had been moved into following an exclusion from their mainstream setting.

“...and in the special school even, the day Ofsted were coming in I was told not to bring him in to school that day. They just want the perfect kids on show ” (UH – Parent)

“it definitely was not a last resort, the exclusions, it was definitely a first resort, definitely when it came to stopping him from going on school trips or if Ofsted were coming in” (WM – Parent)

Yet despite this, ex-Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan MP (Con), repeatedly claimed that Ofsted play a crucial role in upholding safeguarding and standards in schools (Lloyd, 2023). Importantly, the newly appointed Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson MP (Lab), while abolishing ‘single-word’ inspection judgements, has continued to back the presence, role and relevance of Ofsted (Ng, 2024). As such, Ofsted’s presence as a mechanism of governance is continually made tenable by those with the power and authority to challenge high-stakes nature of Ofsted judgements. I suggest that this is in part made possible by the co-option of care and what it means to be caring in schools. Throughout her book, Lynch (2022) explores how competition is ubiquitous in neoliberal capitalist society - competition is fed by constant measurement, comparison and metricization. This hierarchical ordering of people and organisations is care harming while also being foundational in a society that places so much value on competition and the enhancement of human capital. Cooperation between schools striving to provide the best education to all children is undermined by comparison and competition that only values what can be measured. As a result, Lynch (2022:147) argues that relationships that should be care-led are being perceived through a transactional lens. My research project has shown that in schools, this can lead to a view of children as a means to secure personal or institutional achievements. Alongside this, Dadvand and Cuervo (2019) argue that the caring practices enacted in schools have begun to change as the pressure to raise standards and perform in measurable ways has increased. Caring practices are now framed around “achievement, excellence and outcomes” (Dadvand and Cuervo, 2019:378). Care and caring for children is now intimately connected to outcomes and

achievement, care has been co-opted to serve the needs of the education market. This is what Dadvand and Cuervo (2020:140) refer to as the “performative ethic of care”.

However, what is important here is the way in which this co-option of care influences the decisions and practices occurring in schools regarding exclusion. Ofsted, with its arms-length influence over the practices that occur in schools (Thomson, 2020:56) is quite clearly an example of “governing via steering” (Thomson, 2020:54). However, where a performative ethic of care is present, ‘care’ becomes a tool to justify and legitimise the aforementioned “governing via steering” (ibid.), even where this is not in the best interests of all children in the school.

“I think the pressure from the government to improve, improve, improve definitely works against [inclusion] and can increase the exclusions rate. I think that parent pressure as well is hard with that because if they're seeing the Ofsted inspection reports and using that against you, that can be difficult to manage too.” (CP – LA Inclusion Officer)

Above, local authority inclusion officer, CP, demonstrates how this performative ethic of care can have significant consequences for children considered to be at risk of exclusion. Her experience shows how the requirement to continuously improve and raise standards in education, while negatively impacting the ability of a school to be inclusive, serves to care for the school’s reputation amongst potential new parents by aiding a positive Ofsted inspection report. My research demonstrates how education professionals are stuck between a rock and a hard place, where making the decision to enact relational and inclusive forms of care that meets the needs of all children conflicts with the requirement to compete, perform and enhance human capital. Yet to survive in a competition focused

environment, and to care for their own reputation, schools must adhere to the demands, expectations and requirements of Ofsted. Despite their better judgement, the actions of educators are being influenced by a regulatory force whose presence - in the surveilling of everyday pedagogical practice - threatens the very existence of schools operating in any way that deviates from a performative ethic of care that sees behaviourism as a guiding principle in the education of children.

Despite the fact that inspections can be many years apart, the experiences of my participants demonstrate how concerns about Ofsted are an everyday anxiety for education professionals. The performative ethic of care that governs daily pedagogical practices is a constant companion where schools “*tend to fear Ofsted because of the damage they can do*” (MW – Behaviour Support/Classroom Teacher). While it is certainly the case that some schools will go many years without an inspection, in 2021 the Conservative Government of the time provided more funds to Ofsted to ensure that every school was inspected on at least one occasion before late-summer 2025 (Owston, 2023). Furthermore, there is always the potential for an urgent inspection, this can be triggered for a variety of reasons including safeguarding concerns and unusually low pupil performance (Ofsted, 2023). One of the classroom teachers I interviewed explained to me that this fear of triggering an inspection had encouraged the leadership team at her small village school to engage in illegal exclusionary practices.

“they [school leadership team] knew they weren't going to pass, that child was simply not going to pass and they suggested that child should be homeschooled for that final term, and kept out of the data because if that one child fails then their data goes down by 10

percent so only 90 percent passed. And I thought that was absolutely diabolical, I thought how on earth can you [participant stutters in disbelief]. Ofsted, it was an outstanding school so they had, they had influence on deep dives and they [participant sighs]. For data, to give them 100 percent last year and 90 this year, a big drop, that would have triggered something. So they actually kind of suggested that child be homeschooled just so their grades didn't drop and I thought that was appalling” (AS - Classroom Teacher)

The experience of AS demonstrates how the actions of school leaders, and the decisions they make about how and where exclusionary practices should be used, are sometimes informed by a fear of inspection. Therefore, while Ofsted do not directly encourage schools to exclude children who are not perceived as likely to achieve desirable academic outcomes, their very existence and function encourages schools to engage with a performative ethic of care which places the reputation of the school on a higher level of importance than the education of all children in the setting. In all of the quotes from education professionals included in this section, a justification of using exclusionary discipline for illegal means can be observed. My participants spoke of “fear[ing] Ofsted because of the damage they can do”, having to “be seen as responding to those behaviours” and the “pressure from the government to improve, improve, improve”. None of these reasons meet the legal threshold for an exclusion as set out by the DfE (2024a), or officially accepted by Ofsted. However, while DfE guidance does not permit exclusion being used in response to performance pressures and the priorities of Ofsted – that being a close focus on academic achievement and outcomes over pastoral care and support (Walker, 2023) – it does put educators in a very difficult position. Yet this is not simply a matter of legality and illegality, this is a moral and ethical issue. In discussing children’s

vulnerability to exclusion with reference to performance pressures, the educators distance themselves from the act of exclusion – both as a relational interaction and techno-bureaucratic process – and from the education system that attributes value and worth to children on the basis of their expected academic outcomes and their ability to respond to behaviourist pedagogy. They cannot be entirely blamed here, they are also operating within an unfair and discriminatory system. I therefore suggest that this act of separating educator agency from the act of exclusion is a mechanism of self-preservation in a school system where the dominant values are those of competition, control and regulation (Lynch, 2022). These are the values that not only dictate how an educator ‘should’ behave but also, how care is displayed and distributed in the school system and beyond. These educators are behaving illegally and unethically in a school system that both forbids and encourages them to operate in this way.

7.3 Balancing time for pastoral care and meeting the needs of the market

When discussing the capacity that people have to care for those around them, political philosopher, Tronto (2015:2), makes note of the existence of a ‘care crisis’. Rather than using this term as it is typically used to refer to a lack of health and social care available for the elderly, Tronto (ibid.) uses the phrase ‘care crisis’ to refer to the time available for displaying care and compassion towards others. Importantly, Tronto (ibid.) does not consider this lack of time for care and compassion to be an individual or personal failing, but one that is systematic, deliberate and political. In making this observation, she shares the view of Brown (2005) that neoliberalism rewards behaviours that are informed by cost-

benefit calculations and market rationality. When speaking to education professionals about primary school exclusion, the lack of time available to adequately support children considered to be 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' of exclusion due to externally imposed accountability pressures was discussed repeatedly. An explicit link between lack of time and exclusion use was drawn by educational psychologist, RS

"It's like 'we need to get through this teaching, and if a child is getting in the way of that, in any way, regardless of if it is to do with their needs, then we have to intervene, we have to do something about that' and that's where exclusions come in" (RS – Educational Psychologist)

Later on in the interview, RS expanded upon this statement explaining that she considered time to be one of the most important resources that a school could utilise in preventing exclusion use. However, she also recognised it as significantly limited, with the time of school staff increasingly being taken up by curriculum demands and administration

"But I think from a staff perspective, it's hard, they have got to teach their lessons, it's one thing after the other. I think time is a real, it's the most valuable thing, but it's the one thing that they don't really have on the ground in schools, time. And yeah, I think they had got the time and the resources, which they don't have, then they probably would be able to put the level of support in that we need them to put in place, but because they don't have them, certainly classroom teachers they're really struggling, even SENCOs, they have so much admin work to do. What we would like in an ideal world just isn't realistic for schools

because of the limited resources, because of the limited time that needs to go into really supporting children and young people” (RS – Educational Psychologist)

Classroom teacher, QP, raised similar concerns regarding the time pressures imposed upon teaching staff

“Your timetable from the time the children come in at half past 8 to the time they leave at quarter past 3, there's not one minute of your day that is not packed with lessons, curriculum, there's just no, there's no time” (QP – Classroom Teacher)

When asked if this lack of time influences decisions to exclude, QP said

“I think it's [exclusion] a last resort for any school but because the pressures on schools are so high at the moment it's their last resort but also their go-to really because it's, what do they do next? where do they get the support from next? It's all about that support network really and figuring out what could happen. So yeah, I would say so, yeah, that's probably what they're using it for, that time, there's no time” (QP – Classroom Teacher)

According to Colley, et al., (2012) clock time – where human activities are forced to align with the logic of the clock – is the dominant logic of time in capitalist societies. As such, the daily activities and priorities of schools are also mediated and managed by clock time (Lynch, 2022) . Despite this, much educational research, particularly research on school exclusion, takes a common sense view of time that does not consider how decisions about how and where time should be distributed are implicated within the use of exclusionary discipline. Therefore, the structural forces that determine how time is distributed are left unseen and unquestioned (Colley, et al., 2012). However, my research demonstrates that this is a significant oversight and the distribution of time within the

primary school setting should indeed be a point of departure when considering how children are made vulnerable to school exclusion.

Throughout the interviews, the majority of education professionals drew attention to how their time and the time of others working in primary education was dominated by meeting the requirements of the national curriculum, preparing children for national examinations or ensuring that the school was in a position to be judged positively by Ofsted – all of this left very little time for pastoral or care work. Lynch's (2022) scholarship is useful here in her observation that in neoliberal societies, care work can only be done after work that serves the market has been completed. As Gillborn and Youdell (2000) make clear, in the context of the school, serving the market involves ensuring that teacher time and resources are increasingly dedicated towards children who are perceived as having the potential to pass at least five GCSE's and therefore, enhance the school league table position. Importantly, the findings of this research reveal that the power and control imposed upon schools through the policies, guidance documents and accountability targets referenced by my participants also seeks to regulate how time is used and managed in primary education. In the circumstances described by my participants, there is little time 'leftover' in the school day for pastoral or relational work and therefore, relational care increasingly exists on the sidelines with significant consequences for the children in the school. The education professionals involved in this research perceived this situation as frustrating and at odds with the 'nurturing nature' of primary school teachers, particularly where it contributed to the exclusion of children requiring more relational and compassionate time from their teachers. Once again, it is possible to see here how successfully performing the role of acceptable teacher/educator requires

individuals to devote more time to caring for the school as an institution than the individual children within the setting. It is on this basis that I agree with Tronto's (2015) assertion that the absence of time to care is a political rather than individual problem. The quotes above demonstrate that the education professionals I interviewed really do want to dedicate more time to relational work in their schools, yet this desire is incompatible with the demands of a performance focused school system where competition, control and regulation dominates everyday practice.

However, while I agree generally agree with the arguments that Lynch (2022) makes regarding the distributions of time in capitalist society and particularly in schools, I do not think that this issue can be fully understood if the availability of time is considered to be strictly chronological. Throughout the interviews I conducted, my participants discussed how their day-to-day working lives are occupied by administration, and the pressure to ensure that they are meeting the requirements of the national curriculum is a constant companion occupying both their thoughts and actions. This, in combination with the discussion above concerning Ofsted, and the discussion in the previous chapter regarding assigning 'value' and 'worth' to children based on their ability to assist the school in competing in the education market, suggests to me that even if there were more hours in the school day those hours would not necessarily be spent on pastoral care and support. This is because the logic of education policy since the introduction of the 1988 Education Act has been to ensure market(ised) supremacy through re-defining what it means to care for children in schools. Alongside this, individuals have become responsibilized in such a way that they are positioned as wholly accountable for their own successes or failures. This deliberate quantification and compression of time in schools

has ensured that relations between teachers and pupils are constituted in such a way that care – defined as meeting the needs of others – is less possible as a feature. While genuine care struggles to flourish in such circumstances, it remains possible for care to be co-opted as a mechanism of governance by education policy that regards caring for children as being demonstrated by increasing standards of education through focusing on high-stakes accountability, and minimising the freedom teachers have to decide how they spend the time they have in front of their pupils.

The control over how educators spend their time in schools and the harm that this absence of professional autonomy can cause was discussed by many of my participants. Autism support mentor, PJ, has enjoyed a long career in education and has been employed in a variety of roles before taking his current position. This wealth of experience allowed him to reflect on how the school system today looks different to the school system of decades past, particularly before the presence of Ofsted. This perspective allowed him to consider how the freedom to decide how time is used in schools has been depleted with the growing presence and importance of Ofsted and standardisation

“There was an ability for teachers to tailor things to who was sat in front of them, which sometimes would mean lower standards but in doing so, what you were able to do was, if you saw your class had had enough, I could just pack up and take the kids outside for the afternoon and do pottery. The very first Ofsted I took part in, my mentor decided she would take the students out maypole dancing for the whole afternoon and made the man stand out on the yard [laughs], I mean we only got Satisfactory [laughs] but I thought that was

brave! But that was the culture, but now the culture has tried to standardise things but in standardising things it has created an environment where you are teaching to a majority, if you sit outside of that majority then your needs are not being met” (PJ – Autism Support)

This lack of professional autonomy within the primary education system was further referenced by school governance professional, SJ, and inclusion and safeguarding lead, XM. Both of these education professionals described the lack of time available for educators to implement meaningful, inclusive initiatives in their schools as frustrating

“I think they do their best but they're stretched. Particularly at primary, the teachers are generally very nurturing and that is in their nature to want to care for children and I think that is probably what frustrates them, they don't have the time, capacity or resources to do that properly. But they haven't, that's the bottom line and it's beyond their control. I think they do the best that they can do but probably not what they were able to do 10 years ago, and I can't really see how it's going to get better in the immediate future” (SJ – Governance Professional)

“I think the vast majority of schools and school leaders would love nothing more than to spend more time being preventative however, in the high stakes accountability that we have, you just don't have time. If you have taken over a failing school, which I have done, you don't have time to put, what some people would paint, as those 'softer skills' into place because you don't have the time to wait for that to come to fruition. You have to make an immediate impact, which is wrong because we all know that culture takes time to change” (XM – Inclusion and Safeguarding)

The quotes above speak to something more than the deprofessionalisation of those working in primary education. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, the professional autonomy afforded to teachers and school leaders has been gradually eroded with decisions about how schools should approach teaching, learning and behaviour dictated by the national curriculum (DfE, 2013), teachers' standards (DfE, 2021), Ofsted inspection frameworks (Ofsted, 2024) and frequently revised statutory guidance on behaviour and exclusion (DfE, 2022;2024a;2024d). This technocratic control over educator skills and everyday professional practice has ensured that there is no time available for educators to develop, learn and practice alternative pedagogical approaches. The experiences of my participants demonstrate how their daily lives have become task oriented (Deery, 2008). For example, QP described her day-to-day schedule as being filled with back-to-back lessons with no time for pastoral care and support. I argue that this demonstrates how the time for developing relationships in school has become devalued and care is increasingly becoming less possible as a feature of teacher-pupil relationships. This is an important element of the technocratic controlling of educator skills, by filling the time of educators with prescriptive, standardised tasks, monitoring of their work becomes possible (Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019); an important task where understandings of success in education have increasingly become focused on the production of quantifiable and standardised outcomes (Gale de Sax, et al., 2020). Furthermore, this approach to the governing of schooling and teaching practice actively prevents educators from implementing more child-focused pedagogies, as XM explained, "schools and school leaders would love nothing more than to spend more time being preventative however ... you don't have time to put, what some people would paint, as

those 'softer skills' into place because...you have to make an immediate impact". As such, child-focused pedagogies intended to prevent the use of exclusion are positioned as 'impractical' (Apple, 2006). This research demonstrates a concerted effort on the part of policy makers and politicians to ensure that the actions of those in the teaching profession are regulated, controlled and align with the ideological position of the DfE and its 'expert' advisors. In the words of governance professional SJ, teachers want to care for and nurture children but finding the time to do this is "beyond their control". This undermining of educator capacity to care for and nurture the children in their classrooms "generates affective injustices for those in need of care"(Lynch, 2022:81).

In addition to this, parents also noted this lack of time available for care and the nurturing of affective relations, implicating it in the reasons for their children's exclusion.

"But I just don't think they have time to think about sensory issues or consider that he had processing issues and so needed a little more time to fully grasp what was going on. You know, teachers are busy, they just don't have the time to think about that really" (WM – Parent)

Later on in the interview, when asked about what preventative measures were put in place WM said,

"the head and the class teacher and the SENCO did try and put things in place but I'm not sure how much of that was actually lip service to be honest, so they could say they have done their bit and they could tick that box and exclude him"

UH had a similar experience with her son's school and local authority

“they have too many kids on the caseload, too little staff, too little time and it's just quite easy to get lost isn't it? They have all these new EHCPs coming in that they have to deal with, so they just get on with those and forget the other children who also need help” (UH – Parent)

The experience of these parents demonstrates the human cost where the first priority of schools is the delivery of specific curriculum content that enables comparison, competition and accountability at the expense of understanding children’s anxieties and building affective relations (Noddings, 1992:10). Furthermore, what these quotes also reveal is the damage that a focus on ‘quick-fix’ and surface level solutions can cause. WM spoke of the preventative support that was offered to her son as being a “tick box” exercise that facilitated his exclusion. UH described how the attention of her local authority was focused on signing off new EHCPs rather than providing continuing support to children who have already been assessed. These experiences can be explained through the work of Colley, et al (2012) who suggest that where cuts are made to public services but the exchange values of input vs. output, cost vs. benefit and performance targets remain in place, time is devoted to those who are considered to be the ‘easiest to help’. The children of WM and UH were not perceived as being a ‘quick win’ by their school and the local authority, they needed devoted time, attention and support that the institutions were unable to provide to them in the context of sustained real-terms budget cuts and increasing arms-length governance of day-to-day activities. As a result, exclusion becomes an attractive alternative, or in the case of UH’s son, the only possible outcome, where the time available for support is not prioritised and perceived as worthwhile.

7.4 Creating a culture of ‘good’ behaviour

All mainstream primary schools in England have a responsibility to produce a behaviour policy. According to the latest guidance published by the DfE (2024d), this must assist in the creation of a school ‘culture’ and ensure that the national minimum expectations of behaviour – as determined by Ofsted - are upheld. These minimum expectations include zero-tolerance of low-level disruption and the ‘appropriate’ use of suspensions and permanent exclusions (Ofsted, 2024: para.472). The guidance that schools are expected to follow when developing their behaviour policy very clearly aligns with the philosophy of behaviourist pedagogy (Dadds, 2001; Mills and Thomson, 2022). Approaches to behaviour management featured heavily in the conversations I had with education professionals. Their experiences make clear how the approach to behaviour management a school takes can influence how exclusion manifests as a techno-bureaucratic process while also providing some insight into why exclusionary discipline endures as an accepted response to children who are not behaving in a way that adults approve of

“It's simple and easy to write down and understand isn't it? the behaviourist approach. Whereas the other stuff is all like part of the 'woke-arati', it's wet, it's all strategies that take years to understand then it's one of those that when you think you have understood it, you realise how little you actually know.” (PJ – Autism Support Mentor)

“we [the local authority] try to endorse the process we go through to make it more of a holistic approach rather than a knee-jerk send them here or send them there, so it slows the process down which schools get frustrated with because it doesn't happen quickly but it is a better process. But the hard bit is when schools are saying "we can't manage

them, what are you gonna do, can you get somewhere now". And we're going no hang on, have you looked at this, have you done that and that's where it's hard sometimes to slow the process down because all the school is seeing is the behaviour.” (CP -LA Inclusion Officer)

“I think it's just difficult to encourage change and when you have children with different difficulties going on it can seem to some that you're treating some children one way and some another way. So I think a blanket approach is preferred for some schools but it doesn't always work” (EC – Educational Psychologist)

When talking about behaviour management techniques used in schools, PJ made a comment regarding his perception that relational and/or trauma informed behaviour management strategies were considered to be characteristic of the ‘wokearati’ by proponents of behaviourism. This was a light-hearted comment. However, PJ raised this point during a broader conversational theme regarding the importance of feeling a sense of belonging within a group and the difficulty some people have in accepting that their approaches to pedagogy and behaviour, even the values that they have embodied throughout their teaching career, may be causing harm. Therefore, while the specific term ‘wokearati’ was not used in a serious manner, PJ’s observation raises an interesting point about the potential for educators to adopt an alternate behaviour management strategy to that encouraged by the Department for Education and to resist the pressure to use exclusionary discipline. Importantly, the term ‘wokerarti’ was used and popularised by then Home Secretary, Suella Braverman (Brown, 2022), in the months before my interview with PJ took place. Braverman used this term in a derogatory and accusatory way to

describe the actions of ‘disruptive’ climate change protestors who act in opposition to the “law abiding majority”. Therefore, by deliberately adopting this specific terminology, PJ implies that being part of the ‘wokerati’ is negative, perhaps even defiant of accepted laws and norms, while also suggesting that decisions about who occupies this group of unacceptable educators are informed by politics and politicians. As stated above, Department for Education guidance and policy documents including, ‘Behaviour in Schools’ (DfE, 2024d), ‘Suspension and Permanent Exclusions’ (DfE, 2024a) and the ‘Teacher Standards (DfE, 2021) all emphasise that educators should practice a rewards and sanctions focused behaviour management approach, a characteristic of behaviourist pedagogy. Anyone who acts outside of this narrow remit, anyone who attempts a more child-centred pedagogical approach, may be at risk of being positioned as a member of the ‘wokerati’ therefore bringing into question their professionalism. CP and EC also recalled experiences of alternative approaches to behaviour management being resisted in their local schools. They describe school leaders as wanting ‘quick fix’ solutions and ‘blanket approaches’; such desires reflect Government behaviour policy guidance (DfE, 2024d). Arguably demonstrating the resistance school leaders have towards engaging in practices that would position them outside the boundaries of expected and acceptable performance as a school leader in an English primary school. Again, drawing upon Apple (2006:75) it is possible to suggest that more progressive or child-centred approaches that do not condone behaviourist responses to behaviour are considered to be “too ideological, too costly, or too impractical” by policy makers and the Government. Meanwhile, behaviourist pedagogy is positioned as rational without any ideological connection. Care theorist, Noddings (1992:39), draws attention to this

incoherence when discussing teachers and the values they enact in the classroom, “Pressed, many will protest that they do not have a right to impose their values on students, but these same teachers enforce all sorts of rules – sensible and mindless equally – without questioning the values thus imposed”. The experiences of my participants demonstrate how normalised behaviourist approaches to behaviour management have become in the English school system. Significantly, in a demonstration of the influence education policy has on classroom teachers, the contributions of my participants sometimes mirrored policy wording. As can be seen in the following quote from AS,

“I think if there were no exclusions happening it would allow for future generations to just have such little respect or authority, and actually lack of respect for their education” (AS – Classroom Teacher)

The discussion in the [previous chapter](#) demonstrated how many educators perceive exclusionary discipline as necessary for maintaining safety in schools. This, alongside AS’s view that a school system without exclusion would result in lack of respect for authority, directly reflects policy wording used in the ‘Behaviour in Schools’ guidance where it is stated that a headteacher “must determine measures which aim to...promote, among pupils, self-discipline and proper regard for authority” (DfE, 2024d:7), therefore demonstrating the influence that such documents have over the day-to-day actions schools and teachers. Moreover, the value-neutrality presented by behaviourist school policy conceals undertones of classism, ableism, childism and racism that allow for the disproportionate exclusion of certain groups of children to go unchallenged. I therefore

argue that the dominance of behaviourist pedagogy in policy and guidance documentation for primary schools is far from value-neutral. Rather, it facilitates a presentation of governance as ‘caring’ by encouraging schools to implement a behaviour policy that treats all pupils the same, is easy to implement and understand while also fulfilling the requirement for a ‘quick-fix’ solution.

Importantly, behaviourist approaches to behaviour management were discussed by the parents in my research - none of them felt that the school cared for their child in a holistic way. However, the experience of VB particularly stood out in the way he described a ‘performance’ of care

“I never felt they cared about him at all[...]No, I never felt they did. They said they did, and the deputy would say that they loved him but I view people on their actions not on their words and their actions were not telling me [pause] you just don't respond to a child you claim to love in that way. You are performing, making out you're a caring teacher and you love your pupils but I'm not seeing that. I didn't feel they cared” (VB – Parent)

Drawing upon Tronto (2010) I argue that in this instance, there was a disconnect between caring about, caring for, care giving and care receiving. Above, VB claims that the deputy headteacher had spoken of their love for his son, yet VB did not interpret the deputy headteacher’s actions as caring⁷. This suggests that the deputy headteacher had not considered how the care they perceived themselves as giving was being received by VB

⁷ During the interview VB used the words ‘love’ and ‘care’ interchangeably. While I regard the two terms as having different meanings, for clarity and continuity with the quotes included here, I have briefly also used the terms love and care in the same way as VB.

and his son. Furthermore, when VB states “you just don’t respond to a child you claim to love in that way” he is referring to the punitive disciplinary and exclusionary techniques that were utilized in his son’s school. This statement is interesting in that it reveals the incompatibility between behaviourist approaches to behaviour management and feelings of having received care. Once again, the longstanding presence of behaviourism in DfE behaviour guidance and teacher standards documentation helps to explain this disconnect between given and received care. In utilising punitive disciplinary techniques as a response to the perceived misbehaviour of VB’s son, the deputy headteacher occupies the position of caring educator by behaviourist standards. After all, according to the teacher standards (DfE, 2021), such responses ensure a safe learning environment for children. However, it is clear from the experience VB shared with me that he did not feel his son was cared for by the deputy headteacher. Despite this, it is important to bear in mind that, as is the case with all interviews in this research project, these quotes reflect the views and experiences of adults involved in the exclusion process and their interpretation of how the children may have felt or what they may have experienced. It is therefore important not to assume that the children in question did not feel cared for by the adults in their school at all. Nevertheless, insight into how VB’s son received care can be gained by analysing a later extract from the interview where he returned to, and expanded upon, this perceived absence of care

“he was fine in early years but it just felt like they didn't care about him when he got into year one. I was shocked when I heard about what was happening in the classroom, and I felt, I think if things had been recognised earlier and they had adapted to his needs earlier it would have stopped it escalating. But everything they did, pretty much, made his

behaviour worse and it escalated from there. And they were unwilling to listen to anything”
(VB – Parent)

In this extract, VB discusses an escalation in his son’s behaviour that occurred directly prior to his first exclusion. Returning to the definition of care that underpins this research project - meeting the needs of those for whom you take responsibility (Held, 2005:10) - I contend that this description of the school failing to recognise that this child was struggling to cope in the classroom, demonstrated by his escalation in disruptive behaviour, illustrates how the care needs of VB’s son were not being met by his school. Tronto (2010) provides us with criteria to evaluate whether an institution is caring well. In doing so, Tronto (ibid.) asserts that if care needs are being presumed rather than accurately identified in collaboration with the cared-for, it can be concluded that the institution is not caring well. This is useful as VB talks about the school being unwilling to listen to his point of view, despite his son’s behaviour escalating in response to the school’s methods of behaviour management. This quote, in alluding to how VB’s son responded to ‘care giving’ further demonstrates the disconnect between adult’s expectations of care being received and/or given and a child’s interpretation of that very same action. The site at which this difference in perception butts up against one another is where exclusionary discipline manifests, a child who does not receive care in the expected way and subsequently behaves ‘inappropriately’ may be more easily positioned as defiant and therefore vulnerable to exclusion. Importantly, this idea of what behaviour is acceptable for a child to display in school is necessarily informed by DfE guidance and enforced by Ofsted at the time of inspection. Therefore the freedom for education professionals to determine what behaviour *they* regard as acceptable is limited by arms-

length governance and accountability measures that, in part, base evaluations of whether as school is performing well on the particular behaviours displayed by its pupils (Ofsted, 2024).

Furthermore, while the experience of schools being uncaring was shared amongst the parents who took part in this research, it was felt in different ways. Two of the parents I spoke to interpreted this lack of care as relating to their child's education rather than their personal wellbeing.

"I felt like my son was just a number and they have such a waitlist that it was a matter of get him out and get the next one in straight away" (UH – Parent)

"I do feel that they did what they did with his long term best interests in mind. Did they care about his education? perhaps not so much. Wellbeing? Yes. Education? Maybe no" (TJ – Parent)

In offering a slightly different perspective on the absence of care, the contributions of these parents can be best understood by examining the role of care within neoliberal capitalist society. The work of Badgett and Folbre (1999:319) is useful here, they argue that "in a global economy characterized by increased competition, the relative costs of care are probably increasing". As has already been established, primary schools in the West Midlands are not immune to the demands and values of competition and marketisation that permeate education policy and politics – the quotes from TJ and UH demonstrate how this culture of viewing children as tokens constrains the space available for caring for children on a holistic level. The quote from TJ reveals that while the school did appear to care for her son's wellbeing, in that all of his exclusions were sold as

being ‘in his best interests’ for securing a more suitable school, he was not perceived as valuable enough to his mainstream school to warrant a level of care for his education – TJ explained in interview how her son was commonly sent home without any work to complete. Furthermore, UH’s quote reveals a level of dehumanisation of children within this current system of education, whereby they are perceived as being interchangeable and disposable if they are not ‘fit for purpose’ or valuable to the school. In her criteria for identifying whether an institution is caring well Tronto (2010) suggests it can be concluded that genuine care is absent from an institution if care is only perceived as a commodity that takes time away from other things. The quotes from parents included here demonstrate how care for these autistic children was not prioritised in each of their school settings. While TJ did at least feel that the school cared for her son’s wellbeing, UH did not share such an experience. Instead, her interview revealed how caring for her child was not regarded as a worthwhile time investment by the school he attended and was later excluded from. These experiences assist in building a picture of the potential to care holistically for children in mainstream primary schools, while also making clear how an approach to education that positions children as interchangeable and their academic success a stepping stone to the school’s survival is dehumanising and harmful for children who, for whatever reason, do not conform to expected ‘acceptable’ standards of behaviour.

7.5 Trauma informed practice in a deficit focused policy culture

Throughout the interviews I conducted with both education professionals and parents, trauma was discussed as a potential explanation for the behaviour children display prior

to their exclusion. While the education professionals cited this trauma as resulting from circumstances outside of the school environment, parents used the term to describe how the mainstream education system with its lack of flexibility and intolerance for difference had traumatised their children.

“In the proportion of children we looked at that were excluded a lot of them did fall under the category of having experienced traumatic events at home or had been discussed at the multi-agency risk assessment conference.” (EC - Educational Psychologist)

“the psychologist has said he has got massive school trauma. Even the mention of school he shuts down inside himself. He was at the park with his one-to-one the other day and he saw some staff and children from the school and immediately wanted to leave, didn't want to be there, complete anxiety” (UH – Parent)

Irrespective of where this trauma is believed to have originated, educational psychologist, HJ, explained to me that the behaviour management approach of the school significantly contributes to whether the child's behaviour is responded to with exclusion, or curiosity and compassion

“behaviour policies set the tone for how we're going to approach these incidents, so if you have a very punitive behaviour policy, so that is your consequences, your isolation rooms, you know, that kind of punishment, the likelihood is that you're going to have a higher number of exclusions because that is your response to behaviour. Whereas, if you have a more trauma-informed and relationship focused policy, and curiosity, that's what I say all

the time, you've just got to be curious, and as soon as you have someone that looks at it a little differently you can start to ask the right questions that lead to different answers” (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

However, this freedom to respond to children differently depending up the circumstances and actions precluding the display of ‘inappropriate’ behaviour is not only more time consuming than relational approaches, as discussed above, but acts in direct opposition to guidance provided by the Department for Education. In the most recent edition of the ‘Behaviour in Schools’ guidance (DfE, 2024d:15), schools are encouraged to develop “pre-agreed scripts and phrases to help restore calm” where children are misbehaving. Noddings (1992:19) suggests that “caring teachers listen and respond differently to their students”. Therefore, this guidance both discourages the development of relational and affective care while also manipulating what it means to care for children in schools by presenting this form of governance over teacher actions as a way to ensure “consistent, fair and proportionate” (DfE, 2024d:9) responses to misbehaviour.

Throughout the interviews conducted as part of this project, almost all of the education professionals were aware of or had some connection with training on trauma informed teaching practices – indicating that this is not something occurring on the fringes of education. However, despite the increasing interest in trauma informed approaches to behaviour management and the growing awareness that the reasons behind children’s behaviour need to be considered when exclusionary discipline is proposed, the educational psychologists I spoke to warned that there is a risk of trauma informed

approaches becoming a fashionable trend in education without any real substance behind them

“This is the issue we have at the moment, a practitioner will go on training, and they then say 'we're trauma informed' but if you look at that roadmap and what it takes to go from a trauma aware organisation to a trauma informed organisation, or even a step before, trauma responsive. I would say that most of our schools are trauma aware but that is not embedded in their practices and routines, you can see that in their behaviour policy because it will change their policy and how they approach things. So we have a big thing at the moment of trying to get schools to understand that journey, and then they will say '50 per cent of our schools have attended trauma training', but then they know themselves that it is not translating into practice. It's obvious because we have a high number of looked after children who are being excluded, we wouldn't have such a high number if we were seeing trauma informed approaches and practices in our schools” (HJ – Educational Psychologist)

“there's a bit of a thing about the word trauma being misused. There is a danger of it becoming a buzz word which is then seen by some people as an excuse for anything, and it's partly because maybe the term is banded around too much and too loosely without a good shared understanding of what trauma is. I think the terms relational is more appropriate, it sits better” (IB – Educational Psychologist)

The quotes from HJ and IB reveal how easy it is for a well intended intervention to not have the desired impact in a school with regard to reducing exclusion use, and there was clearly a concern from my participants that trauma informed practices were becoming

more of a superficial label than an imbedded and transformative pedagogical approach. When turning to HJ's observations regarding how trauma informed training translates into practice, it can be seen that there is a discrepancy between what education professionals perceive trauma informed practice to be, and how it was intended to be implemented. HJ specifically identifies the disproportionate exclusion of care experienced children as being an issue where schools claim to be trauma informed. Drawing upon The Care Collective (2020:11) I suggest that this superficial application of trauma informed practice in schools is a form of 'carewashing' – a false impression of the caring and nurturing credentials of a school is given when educators take part in trauma informed practice training that allows schools to proudly display their certifications, despite failing to implement the approaches into everyday practice. Taking part in such training allows schools to position themselves as being socially responsible, providing even greater legitimacy and perception of necessity to the use of school exclusion. Importantly, while trauma-informed practices are shown to be beneficial for children (Donovan, et al., 2019; Diamond, 2020; Stegelin, et al., 2020), they are not compatible with a school system that requires educators to place such an intense focus on performance monitoring, targets and competition. This incompatibility is made clear by Goldin and Khasnabis (2020). They (ibid.) note that trauma informed practice must take into account the role and influence of systemic injustice if it is to be implemented effectively. Where this does not happen, children and their families are likely to be pathologized and blamed for their own trauma. Furthermore, IB made reference to the misuse of the word 'trauma', drawing again upon Goldin and Khasnabis (ibid.) this may lead to children from groups who are traditionally vulnerable to exclusion being seen as 'traumatised'. This concern around carewashing is

particularly pertinent in light of the news that the Home Office have contributed to a £5.8 million research project intended to investigate the effectiveness of trauma-informed practice for reducing school exclusions (Whittaker, 2023). According to the Home Office's partner in the research, the Youth Endowment Fund, this project will primarily focus upon childhood trauma (Youth Endowment Fund, n.d). It does not appear that it will examine the trauma children experience as a result of being required to attend schools that do not have the adequate time or resources to cater for their needs, and that only value their presence where it is likely to result in better outcomes for the school.

7.6 Resisting the use of exclusionary discipline

As discussed earlier, behaviourism is the recommended and dominant mode of operation in the English education system. This has now been the case for over a decade following the publication of the 2010 'Importance of Teaching' white paper (DfE, 2010) and 2011 Education Act, with both documents placing significant emphasis on the role and importance of discipline in schools. In recent years, the narrative that adults must have power over children in schools through the mobilisation of punitive discipline has been echoed in a variety of policy documents including the behaviour in schools guidance (DfE, 2024d), suspensions and exclusions guidance (DfE, 2024a) and Tom Bennett's 'Creating a Culture' review of behaviour in schools (Bennett, 2017). It is unsurprising that the behaviour of children in schools receives so much attention in education policy. As Maguire, Ball and Braun (2010) note, behaviour policy provides the perfect site for Government to micro-manage the running and everyday practice of schools. While such documentation may not always tell educators explicitly how to act and respond to

children's behaviour, it does contribute to the creation of circumstances whereby the range of responses to behaviour appear to be limited (Ball, 1994). At the site of primary education, these limitations on responses to behaviour can come in the form of a pressure to impress Ofsted, or continuously achieve an improvement in exam results. The policy and practice tension described by Ball (1994) was alluded to by assistant educational psychologist, RS

"It's trying to balance those government agendas around Ofsted, how is our school gonna be rated? It's easier to get rid of the children that are affecting where we are. It's difficult to balance those policies with inclusion policies, there's a real tension between inclusion and what it means to be inclusive but then trying to meet those attainment goals and performance management for teachers as well. I think that does create an extra challenge for schools" (RS – Assistant Educational Psychologist)

Despite this 'extra challenge' described by RS, many of the educators I interviewed demonstrated a commitment to the child-focused pedagogy usually associated with primary education (Braun and Maguire, 2020)

"I think it's a culture thing. At the end of the day you have to ask yourself what are you here for, and why do you do the job? And if the answer is for data then maybe you've got the wrong idea. The goal needs to be what is best for the children. Some of the children that we have that do have behaviour problems, we do a lot of work with them to try and get them to the place where they need to be so they can benefit from the school and get what they need to get from it. Exclusion may in some cases be the easy option but that doesn't make it the best option" (ND – Classroom Teacher)

“I think it's how the school responds to those pressures. I'm in year 6 so SATS is a big thing, but I also have a head who says 'what will be will be', I've worked in schools where I have been in Y6 have been called into an office with the door shut behind me and someone has said, 'explain these figures, now'. So we're allowed here to put the children first, to make the time. We don't do it effectively all the time, we're our own worst enemy where we will say we will make time but then also say 'oh I have so much to do, I have to do this and this and this', but it's about, in this school we are allowed to be professional and make judgements based on our children. As a middle leader that's what I say a lot to the younger teachers who are worried and are saying 'oh I have to do this and this', I then say to them, 'well who says that, what do your children actually need?' and that's, as a school, we always put that first.” (LO – Behaviour Support/Classroom Teacher)

In the quotes above, ND and LO both demonstrate an awareness that children's grade outcomes and the data that schools are able to output form a key focus of education policy and practice. Yet despite this, and in line with the findings of Maguire, Ball and Braun (2010), they also provide an example of how the translation and enactment of policy by educators differs from Government expectations of how policy should be enacted. Above, ND shares how his school works hard to ensure that children can remain in mainstream education where possible, recognising that while exclusion is technically an option available to the school, it is unlikely to be the best outcome for the child concerned. This approach defies the recommended practice as set out in the 'Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions Guidance' (DfE, 2024a) with its focus on making use of managed moves and alternative provision as preventative measures, rather than finding ways for the child to remain in their original school. In this short statement, ND

demonstrates how, despite all of the challenges discussed so far in this thesis, educators do still have some capacity to resist dominant policy narratives and enact more child-centred pedagogy. LO's experience reflects broadly similar sentiments. However, she recognised that while the educators in her school are encouraged by senior leadership to focus on doing what is best for the children, sometimes there is not enough time for this alongside ensuring that administrative commitments and attainment targets are met. Drawing upon Braun and Maguire (2020:440), I suggest that this is an example of "doing without believing". LO describes how while she and her colleagues comply with performance and attainment focused targets, this compliance is not entirely uncritical. They are aware that this focus can come at a cost to the pastoral support provided to children and therefore they actively attempt to resist such approaches to education where possible. Further examples of "doing without believing" can be seen in the experience of QP

"To be honest with you, I don't think they [exclusions] serve any purpose at all. I suppose the only thing that they serve is, for example if a staff member has been hurt or something serious has happened, it looks like maybe something is being done or responded to. Personally, I don't think it helps the child because there's some reason isn't there, for that behaviour? There's something going on. So unless you're going to really dig deep and take the time to get to understand what that problem is and get involved in the family, it's just going to be a repeat cycle of exclusion, isn't it?... But personally, I don't think they serve a purpose because where do they go if they get [excluded], they have a fixed term but if you're not responding to why that happened in the first place then there will probably be

another fixed term, and then eventually there will be a permanent exclusion and then, what then? what's the next step then?" (QP – Classroom Teacher)

In their 'doing without believing' paper, Braun and Maguire (2020) demonstrate how primary school teachers enact policies concerning assessments with a sense of deep unease, engaging in pragmatic rather than enthusiastic compliance as they are encouraged to adopt pedagogical approaches that they do not always feel are appropriate. Similar observations can be made when looking at the contributions of QP. In the statement above, QP initially shares her discontent with exclusion as a response to children's behaviour, yet she simultaneously acknowledges that the use of exclusion can contribute towards a performance of being a good or responsible educator. She then returns to a questioning of exclusion as an appropriate disciplinary mechanism. Despite her views on the ineffective nature of exclusion, QP did not discuss any attempts she had made to actively challenge exclusion use – once again demonstrating the 'doing without believing' identified by Braun and Maguire. The experiences of LO and QP demonstrate the tension teachers face when attempting to occupy the position of acceptable teacher subject, while they may personally disagree with the pedagogical approach advocated in their school behaviour policy and education policy more broadly, for all of the reasons discussed earlier - performance pressures, safeguarding, maintaining control of children in the school, attempting to meet need in an increasingly resource-poor environment - exclusion may indeed appear to 'work' in that it appears to be a solution to a perceived problem. Therefore, the educators become more comfortable with engaging with pedagogical practices that make them feel uneasy on an emotional level (Wilkins, 2011; Braun and Maguire, 2020).

Research has shown that headteachers in the West Midlands prefer not to use exclusion, with some regarding it as a demonstration of a schools' failure (Pavey and Visser, 2004). This reluctance is borne out of the view that exclusion is not an effective way to meet the needs of children (ibid.). Similar views were shared by the participants in my research

“Again at primary, I think there is much more emphasis on doing the right thing, they are much more likely to be of the opinion that 'we need to keep this child in school' and they will perhaps go that extra mile to keep them in school” (SJ – Governance Professional)

“my personal opinion is that exclusions are rarely the right move [long pause] it worries me” (CP -LA Inclusion Officer)

“My experience being in and working in primary schools, headteachers are very reluctant to exclude. I know from talking to headteachers that the kinds of behaviours that teachers are having to deal with are increasingly challenging and I think there are probably children in primary school now, whose behaviour may have led to them being excluded 10 years ago but now maybe things shift. So I don't know, I would imagine they [exclusions] are rising a little but I always think it is something that a headteacher would do as an absolute last resort” (GS – Lecturer on Primary PGCE)

Interestingly, through their discussions of “doing the right thing”, SJ and CP frame exclusion use as a moral issue, questioning the appropriateness of such practices and the willingness of primary school headteachers to engage with exclusionary discipline. The parents of excluded primary school children involved in this project also expressed the view that exclusion is an ineffective disciplinary technique, acting in some

circumstances as a warped reward system that granted their children respite from the school environment

“I feel like they [the school] believe it's some sort of like, reward system, but like the opposite. They think 'oh we'll exclude them and then when they come back they will have realised what they have done' but actually in our case, it said to my son 'I can be naughty at school and I can get sent home, that's great' [long pause] it didn't serve any purpose to us! It must have helped get the EHCP but I'm sure we would have got it regardless, eventually.” (UH – Parent)

“I would say, generally speaking, primary school children should not be excluded. How my son reacted, he was very stressed in that environment, he was shamed, he was made to feel bad, didn't want to go into school, didn't want to see the head. Excluding him basically rewarded him. In the end, he learned that if he kicked off, he would get what he wanted and that was to see me, at times I would tell them, "I'm not coming in because that just gives him what he wants" and they would then say "well if you don't then he'll be permanently excluded". So my son would tell me, "I wanted to see you" and so that's why he did what he did a lot of the time, because he learned quickly, they trained him that if he kicks off, they call home and he gets to go home, happy days” (VB – Parent)

These perspectives reflect the recent, growing calls to reduce and/or end the use of exclusion in primary schools and beyond. Such calls have been led by activist movements such as No More Exclusions who, through their research, have highlighted the stark disproportionality in exclusion use. Particularly for Black children and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (NME, 2021). Their campaigning has led to

widespread support from educators, parents, education psychologists and academics in their call for a moratorium on exclusion use, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, moral arguments regarding the appropriateness of exclusion use have been voiced by the ex-children's commissioner, Anne Longfield, who recently called for an end to permanent exclusion use in primary schools due to the negative long-term implications of such practices and their inappropriateness as a response to trauma (COYL, 2022). In addition, the West Midlands Mental Health Commission (2023) recently recommended that schools across the region should aspire to 'zero exclusions' with a greater emphasis being placed on supporting the mental health of children in the school. The contributions of the educators who took part in my research, when combined with the findings of previous research, demonstrate that exclusionary discipline, despite its longstanding and emphasised presence in English education policy, is not enacted by educators with an unwavering acceptance. Exclusion, as a techno-bureaucratic process, appears to largely be engaged with as a mechanism of pragmatic compliance rather than with enthusiasm for the behaviourist pedagogical approach. As such, the space for resistance to this practice opens up.

Lynch (2022) draws attention to the incoherence of taking a neoliberal capitalist approach to education whereby a focus on markets and metrics dominates alongside a *tabula rasa* view of children. In making this critique, Lynch (ibid.) asserts that while people are socialized to embark on a self-interested pursuit of capital and power, our capacity for relationality ensures that morally appropriate behaviour is identified and acted out – this is because “[t]he affective care-relational world runs life in parallel to the political-economic world” (Lynch, 2022:198). As such, prioritising relationality and acting with the

explicit intention to care for others can be an act of resistance against human-capital led frames of understanding. My participants, in articulating their “doing without believing” (Braun and Maguire, 2020) approach to behaviour policy enactment demonstrate the impossibility of untangling affective relations within schools, it is these affective relations that encourage educators to apply discretion when enacting policy – “*The goal needs to be what is best for the children*” (ND). Educators are not simply subjects in the policy process, they are key actors who adapt policy and guidance to fit within the ethos of their school (Maguire and Braun, 2020). The relationships between educators, pupils and parents provide a potential catalyst for resistance against the systemically childist, ableist, racist and classist school system in England that sees some children positioned as more or less valuable as a result of algorithmically produced expected academic performance outcomes.

7.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn upon the contributions of my participants as well as scholarship on caring under neoliberal capitalism to demonstrate how the governance of schools through policy guidance and documents has eroded opportunities for relational care while simultaneously presenting caring for the schools reputation and outcomes as the most ‘valuable’ form of care. This has significant implications for children who are not perceived as valuable in the present education system and whose behaviour does not conform to the ‘norms’ imposed by behaviourist informed pedagogies. I have therefore illustrated how implementing mechanisms of governance that function to uphold the education-quasi market come at a cost. That cost is the education futures of children in

need of affective care relations that are underpinned by an ambition to ensure that every child is provided with the necessary time, care and resources to succeed in education. The interviews with my participants did, in many cases, demonstrate a desire to reduce the use of disciplinary exclusion at the primary school level – with almost all participants disclosing an awareness of, and/or engagement with, trauma informed practices in the hope that such approaches would facilitate a more inclusive environment. Many of my participants also expressed a dissatisfaction with exclusionary discipline, viewing it as ineffective and sometimes inappropriate. Yet despite these reservations, all of the educators that I interviewed continued to engage with exclusionary discipline appearing to view it as a ‘necessary evil’ in today’s school system. To me, this act of “doing without believing” (Maguire and Braun, 2020) demonstrates the firm grip that tools and techniques of governance have on those working in primary schools. Furthermore, where policy documents, guidance, public and political narratives regarding behaviour in schools position exclusion as necessary for maintaining standards and ensuring the majority of children receive a good education, the use of exclusionary discipline is further positioned as a ‘caring’ act. Therefore, educators are encouraged to act in ways that they do not feel entirely comfortable with, while simultaneously not feeling empowered enough to resist.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

At the outset of this research project, I began with the intention of drawing upon the knowledge and perspectives offered by scholarship on the topic of care under neoliberal capitalism and emerging literature on childism to understand more about why exclusionary discipline has endured as a seemingly essential component of school behaviour policies; despite evidence of its ineffectiveness with regard to improving behaviour and the negative impact that it is shown to have on the lives of excluded children and their families. As such, this research project was approached with intention of answering three research questions, they were: 1) In a school system that emphasises competition, choice and high-stakes accountability, what purpose does the use of exclusionary discipline serve according to education professionals working in and with primary schools in the West Midlands?, 2) What can theories of care and the concept of 'childism' reveal about how children are made vulnerable to exclusion and suspension from primary school in the West Midlands?, and 3) What can the experiences of parents of excluded children and education professionals reveal about the reality of inclusion in primary schools across the West Midlands, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic?

As I progressed through the writing up of my research findings it became clear that the answers to each of my research questions were interlinked. As I attempted to provide a distinct answer for each of the research questions in turn, I came to realise that the reasons why and how children are made vulnerable to school exclusion are deeply embedded within the purpose that exclusionary discipline serves in a performance-

focused school system; a focus that has fundamentally shaped approaches to, and understandings of, inclusive practice in primary schools. In what follows, I will draw out what I believe are the primary contributions to academic knowledge made in this thesis, using them to inform a response to the research questions above. Following this, I provide a reflection on the research process, exploring policy and practice implications of the findings, before finally outlining limitations of the study and areas for future research.

8.2 Creating disposable children

By taking a sociological approach that not only considers the role of systemic and institutional discrimination against children, but also political and economic ideologies that foreground ‘individual responsibility’, competition and high-stakes accountability, through this research project I have contributed to illustrating and unpicking the deficit views of excluded children and their families that are present in both policy and everyday practice. In doing so, I have documented how sustained increases in exclusion use prior to the pandemic, and a rapid return to the use of exclusionary discipline following Covid-19 related school-closures, is not the result of increasingly ‘naughty’ children, ‘demanding’ parents or schools that have lost ‘control’ of the children under their supervision. Rather, in response to research questions one and two, I contend that exclusion use, particularly the disproportionate use of suspensions, permanent exclusions and illegal exclusions involving marginalised children, is a systemic and institutional issue fuelled by a toxic combination of deficit discourses that surround children, an increasingly ‘performance-focused’ primary school system and the erosion of relational care from the English school system as a whole. As such, I suggest that

children who are excluded (in all forms) from primary school are unknowingly pawns in a ideological and political game – constructed as disposable by adults operating in a school system that wilfully neglects to prioritise the genuine inclusion of *all* children. I will now set out my reasons for making such a claim based on the evidence gathered for, and presented in, this project.

The first point that I will attend to is the normalisation of the use of exclusionary discipline and practices in English primary schooling. Taking inspiration from Anand's (2017) work on the banality of infrastructure, it is clear that in order to answer research question one and ascertain an comprehensive understanding of the purpose that primary school exclusion, in all of its forms, serves, one has to pay attention to how exclusion is constructed in education policy, public commentary and opinion. Exclusion, as a techno-bureaucratic process, appears within policy documents and guidance to be a relatively straightforward and, arguably, a logical practice. The DfE (2024a) guidance document on suspensions and permanent exclusions rather routinely documents the process of excluding a child from school, detailing the reasons for which a child can be legally excluded, the law that underpins exclusion use and the responsibilities of the headteacher, governing board, local authority and independent review panel. Within such a document, the injustice and harm of exclusionary practice is not attended to; further aiding its normalisation as an acceptable element of schooling. This was reflected in the contributions of my participants whereby educators expressed the view that implementing a policy of 'zero exclusions' in primary schools, as recommended in the Children's Commissioner's report (2017), would only be possible in an 'ideal world'. They were keen to emphasise that, at present, there are many factors preventing such an

approach from being possible including the need to ensure children have respect for authority, more infrastructure to support the inclusion of all children, a fear of being ‘out of step’ with policy rhetoric, and training to change the attitudes and approaches of staff members who are resistant to inclusive practice. Importantly, the acceptance of exclusion as an everyday practice and process is reinforced at the very beginning of DfE (2024a:3) exclusion guidance where the following statement is made, “Schools and local authorities should not adopt a ‘no exclusion’ policy as an end in itself... Instead, schools and local authorities should work to create environments where school exclusions are not necessary because pupil behaviour does not require it”. The guidance goes on to recommend that schools can avoid the need for exclusion by ensuring the implementation of ‘good behaviour cultures’, borrowing terminology from DfE behaviour advisor, Tom Bennett’s (2017), ‘Creating a Culture’ report. A report where Bennett first recommends that schools improve behaviour by investing in ‘internal exclusion’ units for children to attend until they have learned how to appropriately embody and enact the ‘culture’ of the school. Significantly, neither document dedicates any attention to encouraging an exploration of why children may be unable or unwilling to conform to a pre-constructed ‘norm’ of acceptable behaviour decided by the adults who make up the school leadership team. In placing so much emphasis on the behaviours of individual children, neither document explores how and why exclusionary practices are used, not only in response to pupil behaviour, but as a coping mechanism in a highly-pressured, competitive and resource-poor school system. As a result, there is no meaningful or critical engagement with evidence suggesting that particular groups of children are disproportionately and unfairly exposed to exclusionary discipline, or that exclusion may

result in harm to children. This willful ignorance regarding the potential harms of exclusion and commitment, on the part of the DfE, to embed behaviourist ideology within schools has emboldened people like Bennett to label individual anti-racist and anti-exclusion campaigners such as Zahra Bei, and groups criticising the DfE's approach by calling for an end to exclusionary practices, as, 'extremists' – inaccurately suggesting that their campaigns to end exclusion seek to ensure abusers and victims are forced to share classrooms (Bennett, 2022).

The use of the word 'extremist' by Bennett is important. The UK Government's own definition of extremism refers to promoting ideologies based on hatred or violence, intended to destroy the rights of others (Gov.uk, 2024). A fear of being labelled as such was voiced by my participants. In one of the first interviews conducted as part of this project, BP, a school governor with extensive experience teaching and leading schools at primary and secondary level, described how schools that attempt to be more inclusive and avoid using exclusionary discipline are "on to a loser". He explained that inclusive, child-focused, school cultures and pedagogical approaches put schools "out of step" with the pedagogical approaches favoured by Ofsted and influential advisors such as Tom Bennett – leaving schools "swimming up the current" in a policy climate that champions schools adopting approaches centred around obedience, strict discipline and no excuses. Similar sentiments were echoed by another participant with extensive experience of the primary and alternative provision sector, PJ. He described engaging with trauma-informed behaviour strategies as risking being seen as part of the 'woke-arati'. Importantly, these participants were not advocating for the abolition of exclusion, they were simply expressing the view that schools need to be more inclusive and aware of

discrimination. Yet, this fear of being labelled as ‘Other’ or as, in the words of Bennett, an ‘extremist’, are nevertheless present. Recent comments made by ex-schools minister, Jonathan Gullis, where he claimed that schools are full of teachers pursuing the “rapid woke agenda” with there being “too many activists in the classroom” (Cumiskey, 2024) serve to cement my participant’s fears of being labelled as ‘woke’ should they engage with inclusive behaviour policies that do not align with those recommended in DfE policy.

While not all of my participants expressed their discontent with DfE behaviour policy and approaches as explicitly as BP and PJ, almost all of the educators engaged in some form of ‘doing without believing’ (Braun and Maguire, 2020); discussing the influence that behaviourism and behaviourist pedagogy has on their daily practice and demonstrating how behaviour policies provide a “key site of policy activity” (Maguire, et al., 2010:156). While school leaders are provided with extensive guidance on behaviour and exclusion use, there remains a degree of discretion regarding exactly who should be excluded, when and why. After all, the aim of the ‘Importance of Teaching’ (DfE, 2010) white paper was to provide headteachers with more power and autonomy regarding exclusion use. Despite this, the degree of importance given to exclusionary discipline in policy documents led my participants to feel that they had little option but to comply with behaviourist approaches evoking the use of rewards and punishments. Thus, for these educators, having exclusion as an option available in response to ‘poor behaviour’ allowed them to remain ‘under the radar’ or within the ‘in-group’ of educators running their schools in accordance with the behaviourist pedagogies encouraged by the government and associated bodies . Importantly, not all of the educators I interviewed were comfortable working in this way. While Braun and Maguire (2020) identified a tension between policy

and practice at the site of curriculum and assessment, this research project has demonstrated that while teachers and senior leaders are inclined to use exclusion to ensure compliance with policy, they do not always believe that it is an effective or appropriate response to misbehaviour; even in the case of pupil violence. Furthermore, some are engaging with exclusionary discipline out of fear of being identified as being ‘out of step’ with policy rhetoric, ‘woke’ or ‘Other’; therefore potentially avoiding reputational damage at the personal and school level. However, this acceptance of exclusionary discipline as necessary and part of the everyday running of the school seeks to normalise it as a practice. Thus, the harm done to the children involved is invisible, particularly the children disproportionately exposed to exclusionary practices.

Yet, policy rhetoric and comments from influential voices in the education sector have got this issue covered too. Where concerns are raised regarding disproportionate exclusion use, the strategy simply appears to be denial and wilful misinterpretation of statistics. This has been most clearly demonstrated in the Timpson Review of School Exclusion (Timpson, 2019); a review initiated by then Prime Minister, Theresa May, intended to address the ‘burning injustice’ of Black Caribbean boys being disproportionately likely to be excluded from school. Rather than fully investigating this issue, the Timpson (2019:34) review conducted an analysis of official statistics that allowed them to conclude, “the association between ethnicity and exclusion is lower than raw rates suggest”. Such a statement led the more recent, Commission on Ethnic Disparities Report (2021:69) to claim, “if there is racial bias within schools or the teaching profession, it has limited effect and other factors such as family structure, cultural aspirations and geography may offset this disadvantage”. These two quotes from influential Government commissioned reports

contribute to reinforcing deficit narratives regarding excluded and 'at risk' of exclusion children, while also denying the existence of disproportionalities in the exclusion of children from Black and Global Majority backgrounds. Importantly, this denial of disproportionality extended to the participants in the present research project with individuals from local authorities, education psychologists and educators denying that Black Caribbean children were disproportionately likely to be excluded in their locality – despite official statistics stating otherwise. Furthermore, where disproportionate rates of exclusion *are* recognized in reports such as the Timpson Review – the review acknowledged that children with SEND were significantly more likely to experience suspension and permanent exclusion - the reasons for this disproportionality continue to be individualized in commentary from vocal figures associated with the DfE. A clear example of this was seen in a blog post from Tom Bennett where he claimed that if pupils with SEND are more likely to misbehave then they are more likely to be excluded. He argued that this should not be considered discrimination as by excluding the pupil the rest of the school population are protected from potential and/or actual harm (Bennett, 2018b). Such a statement fails to acknowledge how the school environment and 'culture' may not be conducive to producing 'good' behaviour amongst some children and/or how normative understandings of 'good' behaviour are rooted in ableist notions of neuronormativity. In response to research question two, through this research project, I have used work on intersectional childism to argue that such quotes demonstrate how behaviourism can be used to invisibilise the discrimination children experience at school, particularly intersectional discrimination rooted in ableism and racism.

This leads to another area where the present research has contributed to academic knowledge, in answering the third research question and tracing how children are *made* vulnerable to exclusion from school, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. My phrasing is deliberate here, drawing upon the findings of this project I argue that children's vulnerability to exclusion is not inherent. Rather, it is socially and politically constructed and produced. The decision of the UK Government to place restrictions on its obligations to Article 24 of the UNCPRD, by amending the article to ensure the continuation of segregated education and the ability to enrol disabled children in special schools outside of their local area, demonstrates political attitudes regarding the education of disabled children. Given the connections between policy and practice made above, it is little surprise then that existing research on inclusive education has found mainstream teachers to commonly perceive the education of disabled children as being outside of their remit, responsibility and skill set (Varcoe and Boyle, 2014; Stanforth and Rose, 2020). The present project has added to this body of evidence, with my participants commonly expressing the view that excluding children with SEND was often done 'in the best interests' of the child, as a way to ensure that they receive appropriate education outside of the mainstream setting where suitable education could not be provided either due to lack of resource or training. Further, particularly amongst less experienced educators, there was a shared experience of not feeling knowledgeable or appropriately qualified to manage pupil behaviour, particularly the behaviours of children with identified SEND and/or SEMH. Significantly, the findings presented in this thesis demonstrate how the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this issue. At present, knowledge regarding how the pandemic influenced the use of school exclusion at the

primary level is limited. DfE (2024b) statistics do show that the use of suspension and permanent exclusion in West Midlands primary schools has quickly returned to, and is in some cases, exceeding, pre-pandemic levels. The findings of this project provide insight into why this may be happening. My participants consistently discussed a 'narrowing of the norm' in primary education, particularly upon return to school from the Covid-19 associated lockdowns. When talking of a 'narrowing of the norm' my participants were referring to the push from central Government to ensure that children had 'caught up' with missed learning and were performing at expected standards for their age range. Importantly, this policy focus on 'catch-up' was not accompanied by any additional resources and teachers were feeling under immense pressure to ensure children were performing at 'expected' levels. Alongside this, there was no recognition of the emotional impact that the pandemic and lockdowns had on teachers, children and families. Therefore, educators explained to me that they were seeing increasing numbers of children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties – unable to access support due to long waiting lists and limited capacity – while educators themselves were also experiencing burn-out and associated compassion fatigue, making it increasingly likely for them to exclude a child from their classroom and/or school where they did not feel able to manage the child's behaviour swiftly. In a school system that demands the 'same', encourages punishment for children who do not conform to pre-established, adult-imposed, behaviour 'cultures', and views 'misbehaviour' as a demonstration of lack of respect for authority rather than an expression of unmet need, I suggest that the failure to recognise the harms and impact of the pandemic upon return to school has created a perfect storm of circumstances whereby children are being increasingly made vulnerable

to exclusionary discipline. The educators I interviewed recalled the simultaneous impracticality of the catch-up rhetoric that existed alongside their perceived lack of freedom to defy Government guidance. Thus, they explained how exclusion was increasingly becoming a reality where schools needed a 'quick fix' to remove children who were not regarded as contributing positively academic-focused 'catch-up' targets and presenting with needs regarded as too complex and resource intensive to be met in a mainstream school. Daniels, et al (2019a) claim that in England, education policy discourse has a tendency to individualise reasons for exclusion as opposed to exploring the wider social and educational context within which exclusions are used. Through my research, I have shown that these individualising and deficit focused policy narratives and attitudes towards excluded or 'at risk' children have intensified in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is now no space or time in the mainstream primary school for difference.

8.3 School exclusion and the absence of care

Much research on school exclusion use in England locates the practice within the wider educational context, particularly regarding the quasi-marketisation of education and associated league tables, testing and inspection frameworks (Hayden, 1997; Daniels, et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2020; Thompson, et al., 2021). However, in responding to research question two and drawing upon scholarship concerning care and caring under neoliberal capitalism (Lynch, 2022), I have demonstrated the harms of teaching and learning in a school system where the time and capacity for relational care and caring is rapidly diminishing. A consideration of the impact of quasi-marketisation on exclusionary

practices remains relevant, yet can be understood in more depth where it is investigated within a context that considers the influence that neoliberal capitalist values have on the policies, practices and caring potential of the school. Throughout this thesis, I have drawn upon Held (2006:10) in defining care as “attending to and meeting the needs of particular others for whom we take responsibility”. This definition is useful in that it does not explicitly set out what actions are considered to be ‘caring’, yet, it directs attention to the meeting of the needs of others. Such an action requires one to be attentive, considerate and thoughtful. In the school setting, it therefore asks that the person doing the ‘caring’ steps away from individualising discourses of behaviour to carefully consider the educational, social and emotional needs of the ‘cared for’. However, informed by the experiences of my participants, I have documented how education policy – particularly that which pushes for and enables high-stakes accountability – has encouraged schooling and the relationships between teachers and children therein, to become transactional. This is influencing decisions to exclude children from primary school. Autism support mentor, PJ, recalled schools being more lenient towards the ‘unacceptable’ behaviour of children who were predicted to attain ‘good’ grades, and Director of Inclusion and Safeguarding, XM, spoke of headteachers strategically excluding children who they perceived as likely to negatively impact school data. What we see in these examples is children being used as tools to secure institutional gains, with little consideration of the impact that exclusion can have on the lives of the children concerned. Kittay (1999) reminds us that it is impossible to truly care for others in a transactional system. Through this research project I have found that children who either cannot repay, or require additional time and resources in order to repay, the ‘performative

care' commonly found in the school – a form of 'care' that focuses only on producing desirable academic outcomes (Dadvand and Cuervo, 2020) – are increasingly vulnerable to school exclusion. As a result, children are facing a school system where the little care that is available in the school, that being performative care, is 'meritocratically' distributed in that it is only available to those who 'deserve' it because they subscribe to normative ways of being an acceptable school pupil.

Furthermore, the findings of this research have allowed me to conclude that the distribution of time in accordance with market rationality is another key factor in why children are being denied relational care in schools and excluded. To my knowledge, no other research on vulnerability to school exclusion has problematised the phenomenon in relation to how time is distributed and taken up in schools. However, my participants were very clear in associating vulnerability to exclusion with time. In the words of Local Authority Inclusion Officer, CP, "you haven't got the time...to give them what they need...they need time protected with a member of staff who has time for them and cares". My participants were clear in articulating that the lack of time for relationship building and understanding in schools was an issue for all children. However, it was having a disproportionate impact on children with SEND and SEMH needs for whom exclusion was being used as a 'quick fix' for the school so that time and resources could be directed towards those children who were more 'valuable' to the institution – where value is also determined by market rationality. While a lack of time for care and understanding is indeed an important factor in vulnerability to exclusion, the reasons behind the absence of care in schools is much more nuanced and runs much deeper than the dominance of clock time as an organising principle. Decisions about how time is used are impossible to

untangle from the values of the institution and people within. Returning again to the significance of policy, the DfE's behaviour in schools guidance (DfE, 2024d) and exclusion guidance (2024a) both emphasise the importance of having rewards and punishments in schools; therefore normalising punishment in response to perceived 'misbehaviour' rather than encouraging a more restorative, curious and understanding approach. Further, just as Slee and Allan (2001) highlight the incoherence of claiming to have an inclusive education system where pupil referral units are accepted as part of the framework of schooling, many of my participants subscribed to the idea that some children – predominantly those with SEND – would be better suited in special education schools with the time and resources to meet their needs. Therefore framing exclusion as a kindness without problematising that fact that, paradoxically, we presently have a school system where *exclusion* is positioned as a form of *inclusive* practice. This brings us back to the discussion presented at the beginning of this conclusion, the focus in schools at present is to pursue the market agenda, to continuously raise attainment, to perform, to 'catch-up', at all costs. Thus, the ways time and care are used, distributed and conceptualised in schools aligns with these targets. Meanwhile, this technocratic control over everyday practice coming from central government provides educators with little time to, in the words of Noddings (1992:39), "question the values thus imposed" through the enactment of policies that are uncaring and even harmful to so many children. As such, relations between teachers and pupils have, over time, become constituted in such a way that holistic care, love and solidarity have become less possible as a feature. Coming at a cost to children perceived as needing more time and resources than is ordinarily available in the school day.

Nevertheless, exclusion continues to be depicted as a caring act. It is on this basis that I will now present the final point that I consider to be important in developing an understanding of exclusionary practices in primary schools. This final point responds to all three research questions posed at the beginning of this project. All participants in this research project implied that exclusion could be considered a caring act in one of two ways. Firstly, it protects the education and safety of the 'Other 29' and secondly, exclusion is often used in the 'best interests' of the child concerned. However, by making use of the concept of intersectional childism it is possible to demonstrate why using exclusion for these reasons is not caring at all. Rather, it allows discrimination to be concealed and made palatable. The 'best interests' argument closely relates to much of the discussion above. Throughout my research, I have discovered that it was most commonly used when describing the exclusion of children with SEND. This is a form of benevolent childism intersecting with ableism. In these circumstances, the decision to exclude a child is often made on the basis that the school do not have the resources or time to meet their needs and therefore, they would be better educated elsewhere. My concern here is that there appears to be little attention devoted to a consideration of the emotional harm and turmoil that can be experienced when a child is excluded from school, removed from their friendship group and encouraged to transition into a new, unfamiliar environment. Local authority inclusion officer, CP, described this as being a 'horrible journey' for children as they are often left waiting days for suitable provision and/or sent to schools that do not want them. Therefore, I suggest that exclusion is not in fact in the best interests of the child at all, but works in the best interests of the school. It allows the educators within the institution to exist within a 'comfort fantasy' (Migliarini and Stinson, 2021), believing that

they have taken the most appropriate course of action, while also allowing full attention and resources to be returned to the children who the school perceives as worthy of investment in a quasi-marketised economy of schooling.

Finally, in this thesis I have drawn upon the work of Ahmed (2004) to argue that school exclusions are used as a way to restore feelings of security where there is a sense of insecurity. My participants frequently expressed that the primary purpose of exclusion is, and should be, to protect the education and welfare of the ‘Other 29’, ‘non-disruptive’, children in the classroom. This argument has two key elements, the protection of education and the protection of safety. However, these decisions about which children deserve protection and which children it is acceptable and/or desirable to exclude are not neutral, they once again individualise vulnerability to school exclusion. As such, common-sense narratives about the existence and continued relevance of exclusionary discipline are able to be continually presented and defended, while legitimate questions about the willingness and ability of schools to appropriately meet the needs of and educate *all* children are, at best ignored, and at worst labelled as ‘extremist’ (as above). Moreover, where exclusion is considered to be essential for safeguarding – as it was by many of my participants – and we know that certain children are disproportionately excluded, namely children from minoritised ethnic groups, disabled children, neurodiverse children, children eligible for free school meals and children with experience of the social care system, it is important to ask questions about who and what determines which children should be safeguarded and from whom. Once again, these decisions are not neutral but deeply embedded within the childist, racist, ableist and classist assumptions, policies and ‘standards’ that permeate our school system. That

determine which children are a threat to the dominant school ‘culture’ and which children are, in the words of WM, the mother of an excluded autistic boy, more easily positioned as a “bit of a disaster”. The co-option of safeguarding legislation to simultaneously ensure the care of some children while obstructing the care of others (disproportionately those from marginalised groups), provides additional justification to Lynch’s (2022) assertion that care must be considered through the lens of social justice. Yet school leaders who do attempt to be inclusive, to buck the trend of disproportionate exclusion use, are faced with a ‘care penalty’ (Folbre, 2001). There are financial implications for schools trying hard to be inclusive, whether that is through the additional cost of purchasing resources to support needs, hiring more teaching assistants, or losing per-pupil funding where parents exercise their right to school choice and remove their child from a school where their demands to remove the ‘disruptive’ child are met with a request for understanding and patience rather than exclusion.

School exclusion, whether it takes the form of suspension, permanent exclusion, illegal exclusion or moving a child from the classroom to an isolation booth, is not just an educational issue, it is a societal one. Autism support mentor, PJ, ruminated on the idea that perhaps exclusion from school was necessary for society, suggesting that its presence in schools encouraged an acceptance that there will always be an ‘out-group’ of people who are responsible for their own position and can therefore be blamed. I am inclined to believe that such a claim does have an element of truth, reminded of Young-Bruehl’s (2012) assertion that children are scapegoats for institutional problems, this view perhaps encompasses all of the reasons why exclusion endures as part of the everyday nature of schooling. It foregrounds those neoliberal values of individual

responsibility and meritocracy that are so prohibitive to displays of care, compassion and solidarity towards others. In the school, this is not easily questioned as educators are confronted with a policy context whereby the focus on 'catch-up', attainment and competition has made it impossible to care for, to include and to meet the needs of all children in the setting.

8.4 Reflections on the research project

Working on this research project introduced me to scholarship on an ethics of care, caring under neoliberal capitalism and the concept of childism. Through working with these ideas it became possible to analyse the experiences of my participants in such a way that structural and institutional discrimination, dominant values and the influence of centrally produced education policies could be considered within the nexus of school exclusion. Adopting a critical perspective in this research project was important. Individualised explanations for exclusionary practices, whereby the child, parent/s, and/or teachers are attributed as the sole cause of a problem, fail to consider the broader context within which schooling takes place and therefore neglects to interrogate the purposes that exclusion serves beyond punishing a child for perceived wrongdoing. By taking a critical qualitative approach, considering how and why exclusionary discipline manifests within the primary school setting, it was possible to more fully understand the experiences of my participants where they spoke of inadequate resources in schools, issues with teacher recruitment and retention, the pressures of high-stakes accountability, the rise in children with SEND in mainstream schools and the impact of the Covid-19 lockdowns. Care theories provided a useful springboard to consider how the capacity to care for and

meet the individual needs of each and every child in the mainstream classroom have been eroded due to years of neoliberal capitalist ideology being injected into education policy, at Government and school level. Ideologies which have helped to produce narratives regarding which children are 'worthy' of investing extremely limited resources in and which children do not provide an adequate 'return on investment'; therefore, positioning them as vulnerable to exclusion. By incorporating the concept of childism into my analysis of interview data, I was able to build upon literature that identifies the role that institutional racism, ableism and classism play in increasing children's vulnerability to exclusion. This intersectional understanding of childism has facilitated a deeper understanding of how discrimination plays out in the school setting, highlighting the inequalities embedded within school policies, dominant pedagogical and behaviour management approaches. Throughout the course of this project the way I think about the inequalities children face in the school system has developed. While the social justice ambition of critical research in education has always made such an approach appealing to me, engaging with scholarship regarding capacities to care under neoliberal capitalism (Lynch, 2022) and care in the education system (Noddings, 1992) has provided me with the conceptual tools to unpick and more carefully examine school exclusion, interrogating the values that sustain this practice. As part of this social justice ambition, I hope that the findings presented in this thesis encourage people to think differently about and interrogate how and why school exclusions are used in primary schools; particularly in areas like the West Midlands where there are high numbers of children from minoritized ethnic backgrounds, high numbers of children with diagnosed special educational needs and just under half of the children in urban towns and cities such as Sandwell,

Birmingham, Walsall and Wolverhampton are living in poverty (McCurdy, 2024). While this thesis is about primary school exclusion and pays close attention to policy, the themes discussed and findings presented have gone beyond simply positioning the use of exclusionary discipline as a techno-bureaucratic process that ensures safety and is engaged with as a benevolent act that is in the 'best interests' of the children involved. The experiences of my participants, particularly the parents of excluded children, have shown that school exclusion is a harmful process to the children, families and, sometimes, educators involved. The disproportionate use of exclusion for certain groups of children, and presence of illegal exclusions, reveals how this practice is intimately connected to both the value that is assigned to certain children and the value the school system, policy makers and educators within, place on the production of academic outcomes and continuous improvement. As explained above, one of my participants, PJ, suggested that a key function of exclusion was to prepare young people for their future role in society and the acceptance that some people are positioned in the 'in' group and others in the 'out' group. Having listened to my other participants explain what they consider the purpose of exclusion to be, I am inclined to agree with this suggestion that there is a 'hidden curriculum' of exclusion, that it serves an important, yet harmful, social function beyond the punishment of 'unacceptable' behaviour. More than this, engaging with Lynch's (2022) work encouraged me to think deeply about how my participants spoke of the capacities of educators to care for all children in their classrooms, the time they have to build relationships and how they negotiate engagement with exclusionary discipline under these circumstances. From these conversations I learned that without the time and space for relationship building and care being embedded within the policies and everyday

practices of schooling, the values of individualism, meritocracy and competition, that tear apart community solidarity, are provided with the opportunity to flourish. Allowing a performative ethics of care (Dadvand and Cuervo, 2020) to take hold and providing a veneer of credibility to exclusions engaged with as a result of perverse incentives (Daniels, et al., 2019).

Ultimately, this research project has encouraged me to think deeply about the sustainability and relevance of a school system that does not value the presence of every child that comes through the door, that leaves teachers feeling burnt out and experiencing compassion fatigue, that gaslights parents (disproportionately mothers) and refers them to parenting classes when their children cannot or will not conform to the narrow boundaries that make up the 'school culture', and most importantly, that accepts children being excluded from education and waiting for an alternative site of schooling for months because schools do not have the time, resources or incentive to fully invest in the understanding, compassion and curiosity that underpin inclusion. I recognise that there are instances in schools where children behave in ways that are harmful to themselves and others, I am not suggesting that this behaviour should be accepted or ignored. However, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that exclusion is neither an effective punishment or deterrent to these behaviours (Perry and Morris, 2014; LiCalsi, Osher and Bailey, 2021; Jabbari and Johnson, 2021). If harmful behaviours are going to be addressed, children need to be educated about the importance of caring for others and behaving in ways that respect peoples bodies and boundaries, schools also need to model this behaviour (Noddings, 1992). The feminist economist, Nancy Folbre, writes about the 'invisible heart' of economic life (Folbre, 2001). Picking up these ideas, I suggest that it is

important that we begin to think about the invisible heart of schooling; what does it mean for inclusion where market rationality is allowed to govern school policies and practices? And how can this be challenged so that schooling benefits every child that comes through the education system, not only those who are able to perform the ‘ideal student’?

8.5 Implications for policy and practice

This research project provides an analysis of primary school exclusion that considers the multiple and complex ways in which this disciplinary practice is used; and the reasons why it endures. As such, it has value in providing direction and focus in policy circles where there is a desire to implement a fully inclusive school system; especially if considered alongside recent exclusions-focused research that has also been conducted in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Of particular note is the fact that this research project has added to scholarship that demonstrates the detrimental impact that a policy focus on testing and competition can have upon children and education professionals. As Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) make clear, a ‘performative ethic of care’ is only valuable for children who are in the position to benefit from a focus on academic attainment. For many children, attention first needs to be devoted to addressing their physical, social, emotional and mental health needs; providing them with a solid foundation upon which curriculum knowledge can be built. A truly caring school system makes space for the accommodation of difference and therefore, can “cater to the more complex needs of marginalized students” (ibid.:140). By engaging with theories of care and caring when analysing the data collected as part of this project, it has been possible to more deeply interrogate the reasons why exclusions are used in this performance focused school

system that encourages the pursuit of individual academic achievement. This is important because thinking of solutions to complex and longstanding educational issues and inequalities requires that the underlying ideologies behind dominant policy and pedagogy are investigated. My research has further demonstrated the harm that is caused to school children, and professionals working within schools, where there is a constant threat of high-stakes inspection. The pressure to be perceived as ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ at any cost has here been shown to influence school leaders’ use of punitive disciplinary behaviour policies; resulting in the illegal exclusion of children with special education or social, emotional and mental health needs. For classroom teachers and senior leaders, the pressure to always be ‘Ofsted ready’ produces an everyday anxiety that influences what they perceive a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ teacher to be; that teacher is one that is able to get the best academic results out of the children in their classroom, avoiding the unusually low pupil performance that can trigger an Ofsted inspection. Policy makers would be wise to add such findings to the growing body of evidence detailing the inappropriate, inadequate and harmful nature of Ofsted inspections. Additionally, by analysing descriptions of exclusionary practice through the lens of childism, considering how ableism, racism, classism are also present in the school system, I have demonstrated the importance of taking an intersectional approach to examining and addressing school exclusion. The issues identified throughout this thesis speak to the need for systemic change, I therefore hope that it can contribute towards building an approach to school policy development that more thoughtfully considers the responsibility that policymakers have to ensure all children receive an education.

As well as having implications for policy development and direction, I want my research to be used to show that if education professionals are to be fully informed about the true nature and extent of exclusion in their locality, they must be conscious of the ways in which harm permeates and reproduces through the education system. I therefore hope that this research will be useful in professional practice within schools. For this to become reality, and as this research has demonstrated, there needs to be an epistemological commitment to care and caring within schooling (Motta and Bennett, 2018). By this, I mean that the language and action of love and care need to be positioned at the centre of school pedagogy and practice. The words 'love' and 'care' are rarely, if ever, seen in school policies or heard used to describe the pedagogical approaches that are engaged with by a school. I hope that by using theories of care to analyse the practice of school exclusion, I have given educators working in and with primary schools a new way to think about exclusionary discipline and the implications that the use of this practice can have for children and their families. Importantly, this epistemological commitment to caring for and loving children should not be considered an individual disposition, the responsibility of only those educators who are 'pre-disposed' to caring, this should be the responsibility of all within a school and the school system more broadly; including parents and the children themselves. In order to do this, the human-capital-led frame that schooling currently resides in will have to be rejected, and educators will instead have to focus on the promoting values of love, care and solidarity while providing spaces for affective relations to grow and develop. (Lynch, 2022). Education has revolutionary potential (Apple, 2013) and care has resistive potential (Lynch, 2022). I hope that this research, by making visible the invisibilisation of harm that occurs when the 'care-less'

nature and operation of institutions within neoliberal capitalist systems are accepted as the 'norm', can provide a springboard for that revolutionary and resistive potential to flourish.

Drawing upon Noddings (2005), a practical way in which this epistemological commitment to care can begin to become part of the bedrock of schooling is through bringing the development of strong relationships to the forefront of everyday practice. This research has shown how prior to exclusions taking place, relationships broke down between schools and parents and well as schools and pupils; with teachers sometimes feeling disrespected by parents and parents feeling like their concerns for their child's wellbeing and education were not being taken seriously by the school. In many of the interviews, it became clear that a contributing factor to these relationship breakdowns was a fear of how the inclusion of the 'at risk' child would make the school look on the public stage. In responding to criticisms of her work on care and its relevance to a marketised education system Noddings (2005) argued that, far from being irrelevant, care has the potential to act as a mode of resistance against ever the increasing accountability measures that schools are confronted with. Suggesting that where stronger relationships are formed between parents, teachers and pupils, there will be fewer calls for external accountability measures as parents will already know what is going on in their child's school and will have confidence in the schools' ability and willingness to respond to their feedback and/or concerns. Noddings' (2005) work provides a pathway to alternative ways of schooling through her suggestion that stronger relationships can form the basis of resistance to the pressures of marketisation and thus, provide the basis of an alternative framework for considering the appropriateness and relevance of exclusionary practices.

Finally, if called upon in the everyday practices of schooling, intersectional childism offers education professionals a new way to reflect upon the appropriateness of exclusionary discipline. People cannot challenge injustice if they are not aware that it exists. Through applying an intersectional lens to the development and implementation of school policies, educators are provided with the opportunity to challenge injustice. This research found that despite exclusionary discipline being disproportionately used towards children from Irish Traveller and Black Caribbean backgrounds in the West Midlands, many of my participants did not believe that this disproportionality existed. Furthermore, all participants were aware that children with identified SEN/D were disproportionately excluded however, none used the word 'ableism' to describe this disparity. An intersectional lens can provide education professionals with the language necessary to begin investigating and challenging such injustices. The addition of childism to this analytical framework raises awareness of how education policy and everyday practice commonly fails to consider the impact that will be had on the children themselves. In addition, the concept of childism, where it is understood as a form of discrimination against children, can serve to make educators aware of how the voices, opinions and perspectives of children are commonly marginalised when decisions are made about the future of their education. It is hoped that if education professionals are aware of this marginalisation, they may begin to interrogate their own practices and consider how children can be empowered through education rather than removed where they no longer serve adult's needs.

8.6 Limitations of the research

Interviewing nineteen education professionals working in various roles provided this project with a breadth and depth of information regarding the use of exclusion in primary schools across the West Midlands. Despite this, I believe that the overall project has some limitations that are associated with participant recruitment. While I am extremely grateful to the five parents who gave up their time to speak to me about their children's exclusion, I believe that this research project would have been improved if I had been able to interview more parents of excluded children, and even excluded children themselves. However, these limitations provide direction regarding where future research on primary school exclusion would be valuable. Having learned more about the concept of childism throughout this project, I believe that it would be helpful to dedicate specific time and attention to listening to experiences of exclusion spoken by children themselves, without adults deciding which aspects of the exclusion process to place at the forefront of their narratives, or ignore completely. Such research would have the potential to transform how we think about 'inclusive' and exclusionary practices in the school environment, potentially opening up avenues that inspire reductions in exclusion use. Additionally, by interviewing more parents it would be possible to understand in more depth just how similar and common experiences of primary school exclusion process are. Importantly, a project focused specifically on the experiences of parents would be able to further interrogate the important issues of gaslighting, parental blame and narratives of 'bad mothers and their 'bad children' that were raised in this project – demonstrating and dismantling the deficit assumptions made of excluded children and their parents that were so commonly encountered during the course of this project. Finally, though this

research did take place in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on exclusion use was not the primary focus. Therefore, it would be useful for both policy and practice if further research dedicated specific attention to the implications that the pandemic has had on inclusive practice – such a project may aid with understanding the immediate return to pre-pandemic levels of permanent exclusion and suspension use in the 2021/22 academic year and beyond.

8.7 In closing

Dedicating the past three years of my life to this research project has been an honour and a privilege; speaking to people with first-hand experience of this practice has been invaluable and I will be forever grateful for their time. Through engaging with theories of care and the concept of childism, I have been provided with the tools to think differently about, not only primary school exclusion, but social justice issues in education and society more broadly. The use of permanent exclusion and suspension at primary schools in the West Midlands has, with the exception of the Covid-19 impacted years, slowly been increasing for many years and this trend is not coming to an end. We have a wealth of research demonstrating the detrimental impact that exclusion can have on children and families, and we know that exclusionary practices are disproportionately used for children from already and multiply marginalised communities. I truly hope that this research project will give educators and policy makers the courage to step out of that ‘comfort fantasy’ (Migliarini and Stinson, 2020) of believing that exclusion is always in the ‘best interests’ of the child and others in the school. We cannot claim to have an inclusive, world-beating education system while so many children are missing out on valuable

schooling and being denied the support they need to access curriculum content and achieve educational success. Children are not pawns in a capitalist game, their education should not be viewed in terms of a return on investment. To close with the words of the Care Collective (2020:77), “only by confronting, resisting, and eliminating market metrics and corporate power can caring values be allowed to flourish”.

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10. APPENDIX

A. Ethics Approval

Ethical approval granted by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (Application Number: ERN_22-0174A)

B. Information Sheet

The below 'participant information leaflet' was provided to every participant prior to an interview taking place.

Participant Information Leaflet

We would like to invite you to take part in our study. Before you decide we would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore the recent rise in both permanent and fixed-term exclusions from primary schools in the West Midlands. In doing so, it will consider the opinions of educational professionals and parents regarding why this rise has occurred and how children of primary school age are made vulnerable to school exclusion and/or suspension.

Are there any inclusion/exclusion criteria?

To be eligible to take part in this study, you should be an educational professional (e.g., teacher, teaching assistant, headteacher, SENCO, school governor, educational psychologist etc.) working in/with primary schools in the West Midlands.

Or the parent/carer of an excluded/suspended child of primary school age

What will I be asked to do?

Educational professionals you will be asked to participate in one interview, this will either be online or at your place of work (whichever is preferred). In the interview you will be asked about; rising exclusion rates in the West Midlands, how exclusion is used in your school, and how children are made vulnerable to exclusion.

Parent/carers you will be asked to participate in one interview, this will be either online or in a convenient public location (e.g. café/park). In the interview you will be asked about; your experience of the exclusion process and how children are made vulnerable to exclusion

It is expected that the interview will take one hour of your time and the entire interview will be audio recorded.

Can I withdraw from the study after I have taken part?

Yes, participation in this research is entirely voluntary. After you have read this information and asked any questions you may have, if you are happy to participate, we will ask you to complete an Informed Consent Form. However, if, before, during or after engaging with this research you wish to withdraw from the study please contact the main researcher (Megan Whitehouse). You can withdraw for any reason and you will not be asked to explain your reasons for withdrawing.

While you can withdraw before or during the study at any time, due to data processing and analysis procedures, you will only have 14 working days to withdraw from the study after the interview/observations have taken place.

Are there any disadvantages or risks to participating?

It is not anticipated that there will be any immediate risks or disadvantages to participating in this study.

Will I receive any feedback after participation?

If you would like to receive a summary of the main findings upon completion of the study, please contact Megan Whitehouse at [REDACTED]

Who is funding this research?

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

What personal information will be collected and how will it be used?

The only personal information collected for this study will be your name, email address, gender and ethnic group. Your name and email address will only be used to make arrangements for the interview and withdraw your data, if necessary. Information on your gender and ethnic group will only be used to develop a better understanding of the characteristics of study participants.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal information?

Personal data will be processed on the public task basis. For further details on the data protection legislation see: <https://ico.org.uk/your-data-matters/>

How long will my information be stored?

Original audio recordings taken during the interview will be securely stored until the thesis has been accepted, after this point they will be destroyed. However, anonymised transcripts will be kept until 10 years after completion of the study.

Notes taken during observations will be securely stored until the thesis has been accepted, after this point they will be destroyed. However, anonymised versions of these notes will be kept until 10 years after completion of the study.

Will my personal information be shared with others?

No personally identifiable information will be shared with others in this study

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Yes, if you agree to take part in the study you will be given a pseudonym, meaning that no identifiable information about you will be associated with the research content. Therefore, the information you provide in this study will be anonymous.

All data will be stored in password protected digital files, ensuring data security.

How will the anonymised data/results collected from me be used?

The data you provide in this study will be used as part of a PhD thesis. Anonymised data will also be made available for reuse by other researchers, as well as in potential journal publications in the future.

How long will the anonymised data/results be retained?

The anonymous, coded data you provide for this study will be permanently archived to an open access data repository. The anonymised transcripts will be kept for up to 10 years after publication of this study.

Who should I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any further questions please contact:

The researcher, Megan Whitehouse [REDACTED] or Megan's supervisor, Dr Reza Gholami [REDACTED]

C. Consent Form

The below 'consent form' was provided to, and signed by, every participant prior to an interview taking place

INFORMED CONSENT FORM **(to be completed after participant information sheet has been read)**

Fair Processing Statement

This information is being collected as part of a research project concerned with primary school exclusions by the Department of Education and Social Justice in the University of Birmingham. The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised individuals involved in the project. The information will be stored by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018. No identifiable personal data will be published.

	<u>Please initial to confirm agreement</u>
The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee.	
I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information leaflet for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point during the interview/observation, or up to 14 working days after the interview/observation has taken place, without giving any reason. If I withdraw, my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.	
I understand that information I provide in this study will be used as part of a PhD thesis, as well as in potential journal publications in the future.	

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me will not be shared beyond the study team	_____
I agree that anonymous data from this study can be used for other, future research projects that may be unrelated to the aims of this study.	_____
I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018.	_____
I consent to taking part in an interview (only sign if taking part in an interview)	_____
I agree to allow the researcher to observe classroom practice (only sign if taking part in classroom observations)	_____

Consent to Participate

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study

Yes/No

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant [printed]	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher [printed]	Signature	Date

D. Interview Schedule (Education Professional)

This 'interview schedule' provided a loose guide to the interviews conducted with education professionals. Not all questions were asked in every interview.

Contextual information

- Can you tell me a little about your career, how did you come to be in this role?
- Can you tell me, approximately, how many exclusions you have been involved in?
- What is the behaviour and exclusion policy in your school? Is exclusion possible?

Use of exclusion

- In your opinion, has the use of exclusion increased in recent years? Particularly since the 2010's? *What types of exclusion? Permanent? Fixed Period? Internal/Unofficial? Which children do you think have been disproportionately affected?*
- Some children are more vulnerable to exclusion from primary school, does this reflect your experience? *In the case of children with SEN? In the case of children eligible for FSM? In the case of children from Black Caribbean/Gypsy, Roma/Traveller backgrounds? In the case of boys?*
- (if yes to question on increased exclusion) Can you tell me why the use of exclusion has increased in primary schools? *Speaking to the officially recorded reasons and what you feel to be the genuine causes, are they the same?*
- Can you tell me about how you think centrally produced government policy influences the use of exclusion? *Thinking about: Ofsted; school performance measures; behaviour rhetoric e.g., zero-tolerance, behaviour hubs; Covid-19 health and safety policies?*
- Are there any other factors that you feel encourage/discourage the use of exclusion in primary schools?
- The West Midlands has a higher primary school exclusion rate than the rate for England, why do you think this may be?
- Do you feel the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on the use of exclusion/suspension in schools? *If so, why? And which pupils do you think have been made the most vulnerable to exclusion by this?*
- What purpose do you feel exclusion serves? For the school, for the pupil, and more generally?

Agency

- If you have personally excluded a child: how did you come to the decision to exclude? *To what extent do you feel the decision to exclude was 100% yours? Why? Why not?*
- To what extent do you feel the school environment contributes to a child being made vulnerable to exclusion/suspension?
- Does your school implement a trauma informed approach? *Is this something you have heard of/think has potential?*
- To what extent do you feel children excluded from primary school had/have the ability to prevent their exclusion?
- How would you describe excluded pupils?
- How do you negotiate the tension between the use of exclusion and children's rights?
- What does inclusion mean to you?

Thinking about prevention

- What do you think is needed to prevent the exclusion of children from primary school? *Do you feel this interventions should be region specific or national? Why?*
- Do you believe there is a need to reduce the numbers of children being excluded from primary school? *why?*
- Do you think a model of zero exclusions at the primary school level could work? *Why? How?*

Is there anything else you would like to say?

E. Interview Schedule (Parent)

This 'interview schedule' provided a loose guide to the interviews conducted with parents. Not all questions were asked in every interview.

Contextual Information

- Can you describe to me the exclusion process, from your perspective? *When did it begin? What were the events leading up to the exclusion? When/how were you made aware that your child was at risk of exclusion/suspension? How many exclusions/suspensions has your child experienced?*
- How did the school justify the use of exclusion to you?
- Do you feel the schools' response to your child was proportionate to their 'wrongdoing'?
- Do you feel that the school cared about your child and their education?

Vulnerability to exclusion

- Does your child have an identified special educational need? *Do you feel this made them more vulnerable to exclusion? Why/why not?*
- If yes to above, does your child have an EHCP? *At what point was this provided? If provided after exclusion, do you feel an earlier EHCP could have prevented the exclusion?*
- Do you feel that the school did everything they could to support your child to be included?
- Do you feel that the use of exclusion was a 'last resort' for the school?
- Do you feel that your child's ethnicity and/or gender have contributed to their vulnerability to exclusion? *Why/why not?*
- The West Midlands has a higher primary school exclusion rate than the rate for England, why do you think this may be?
- What purpose do you feel exclusion serves? *For the school, for the pupil, and more generally?*
- Do you feel that your child's education was a priority for their school? *Why? Why Not?*

- Do you feel the values of the school were at odds with the needs of your child?
- Do you feel that there is sufficient time in the school day to meet children's individual needs?

Agency

- To what extent do you feel the school environment contributes to a child being made vulnerable to exclusion/suspension?
- Do you feel that, as a parent, you could have done anything to prevent this exclusion from occurring? *If yes, why? If no, why?*
- To what extent do you feel children excluded from primary school had/have the ability to prevent their exclusion?

Thinking about prevention

- Did the school do anything to help prevent the exclusion? *Why do you think this didn't work?*
- Do you feel that prevention is a priority for schools? Why? Why not?
- Are interventions put into place as soon as any additional needs are identified?
- What would your child have needed in order to remain in their school (/mainstream setting)? *Why do you feel this wasn't provided?*
- How was the process of finding alternative education for your child? *Did you get any support with this?*
- What do you think is needed to prevent the exclusion of children from primary school? *Why?*

Is there anything else you would like to say?

F. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Relevance to research project
AS	Working as a teaching assistant with children in Year 6 at a school part of a Multi Academy Trust. AS had previous experience as a Y6 classroom teacher in a small village primary school and planned to return to the full classroom teacher role in the next academic year. AS has always worked in the West Midlands.
BP	Currently working as a chair of governors and vice chair of governors at two primary schools in the West Midlands. BP has over twenty years experience working in schools and the education sector. He also worked as a Ofsted inspector and head of a pupil referral unit.
CP	Currently working as a local authority inclusion officer advising schools on how to implement more inclusive policies and reduce the use of school exclusion – CP specialises in pastoral support and advising schools on how/when to use EHCPs. CP has over twenty years experience working in the primary school sector having worked as a head of English, deputy headteacher, SENCO, safeguarding lead, classroom teacher, wellbeing lead and PSHE lead. CP has always worked in the West Midlands.
DE	Currently working as a local authority inclusion officer advising schools on how to implement more inclusive policies and reduce the use of school exclusion. DE has extensive experience in education, working as a primary school classroom teacher, key stage manager, and headteacher. DE has always worked in the West Midlands.
EC	Currently working as an assistant educational psychologist having graduated from university 6 years ago. EC also has volunteer experience with an autism service and has worked supporting children in both children's homes and specialist SEMH schools. EC has always worked in the West Midlands.
FI	Currently working as a deputy headteacher. FI has over twenty years of experience working in primary schooling, having been employed as a classroom teacher and deputy headteacher. As part of his deputy headteacher role he is also the SENCO for the school and the designated safeguarding lead. FI has always worked in the West Midlands.
GS	Currently working on a primary PGCE course at a Midlands university. GS has over a decade of experience working as a classroom teacher in primary schools, including supply teaching.
HJ	Currently working as a senior educational psychologist. HJ has experience working as a primary school classroom teacher and SENCO. She has also worked as a SENCO in a secondary school. HJ has always worked in the West Midlands.

IB	Currently working as educational psychologist and lecturer in educational psychology at a local university. IB previously worked as an assistant educational psychologist in a primary school before moving on to his current role within the local authority. IB has always worked in the West Midlands.
JP	Currently working as a deputy headteacher and behaviour lead in a primary school. JP has over twenty years experience working in primary education, having worked as a classroom teacher and behaviour lead at a variety of schools and specialising in pupil behaviour. JP has always worked in the West Midlands.
KH	Classroom teacher working in year 4. At the time of interviewing, KH was in her second year of teaching and had also worked as a TA in a special school. KH has always worked in the West Midlands.
LO	LO has almost 25 years of experience working in primary schools. She has worked as a Y6 classroom teacher, Maths lead and a member of the senior leadership team. She is currently working in a teaching and learning support role, focusing on supporting children who are attending her school on short term placements, as well as supporting early career teachers with their development. LO has always worked in the West Midlands.
MW	MW has over thirty years experience working in primary schools, having worked as a classroom teacher, deputy headteacher and headteacher. He has been retired for the past seven years but has returned to classroom teaching on a part-time basis. MW has always worked in the West Midlands.
ND	ND is currently employed as a classroom teacher and head of Maths. ND has always worked in KS2, currently teaching Y6. He has 9 years experience classroom teaching.
OA	OA is a mother to two primary-age children. Her son was excluded from primary school in year 3. He was subsequently diagnosed as Autistic.
PJ	PJ is currently working as an advisory teacher for children who are autistic. In this role he supports up to 300 students at a time, across his local authority. He has extensive experience in education, working as a deputy headteacher in a pupil referral unit and as a classroom teacher in a primary school. PJ disclosed that he is also autistic.
QP	QP is currently working as a classroom teacher in a primary school. She has over a decade of experience working in schools including at a special school and pupil referral unit
RS	RS is currently working as an assistant educational psychologist working with primary school and nursery school children. She previously worked as a classroom teacher in a secondary school.
SJ	SJ is currently working as a school governance professional working in governance roles at primary, secondary and middle schools. She has

	also worked in the prison service specialising in violence reduction and suicide prevention.
TJ	TJ is a mother to a primary-age boy who first experienced exclusion in his reception year. He has a diagnosis of autism, persistent demand avoidance and ADHD
UH	UH is a mother to a primary-age boy who, at the time of interviewing, was without a school placement. Her son had been excluded from both mainstream and special education, with his most recent exclusion being 18 months prior to the interview. Her son also has an autism diagnosis.
VB	VB is a father to three children, two daughters and one son. His son was excluded from primary school in year one and at the time of interviewing was currently awaiting a diagnosis of autism.
WM	WM is a mother to two boys, one of which has an autism diagnosis and experienced multiple exclusions throughout his time at primary school.
XM	XM is the director of inclusion and safeguarding at a MAT in the West Midlands. In this role he ensures that the schools in the MAT are inclusive and meeting the needs of children with SEND. He has over twenty years of experience in primary education, working as a physical education teacher, head of year, head of pastoral support and headteacher.

G. Thematic Analysis Maps

Map 1 – Who is excluded



Map 2 – Exclusion use motivated by policy considerations



Map 3 – Relationships and the use of exclusion

